

# **The Rationale of Hell in Islam**

by

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What follows below is a transcript of a lecture I gave online.

The lecture was divided into the following sections:

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## **Introduction to the Topic**

Bismillah wassalatu was-salaamu ‘ala Rasul-Illah,

Assalamu Alaykum wa-rahmatuallahi wa-barakatuhu,

The subject of hell is growingly becoming an uncomfortable one for several people, Muslims included. It doesn't only trouble many laymen, but it has also posed an intellectual challenge to philosophers and theologians from different backgrounds for centuries.

The magnitude of the problem of hell varies from person to person, and this, in turn, has spurred a whole host of different competing conceptions of hell. Is hell a place of physical suffering or simply mental suffering, or both? Is it a place reserved only for the worst of worldly criminals such as rapists and murderers, or do people who refuse to believe in a certain religion also become its occupants? Is the punishment of hell permanent, or is it only temporary? And so on.

In this age of globalization and more personal interactions with people from different religious backgrounds, many Muslims understandably struggle with this topic, as it's not merely some intellectually challenging theological predicament one is struggling to rationally grapple with, but an emotional and personal one as well. Many of us have non-Muslim neighbors, childhood friends, workplace acquaintances, even non-Muslim family members and relatives, and yet, our own faith teaches that there are those who match the descriptions and traits of the people dear to us that would be going to hell forever if they did not embrace Islam.

Undoubtedly, that is a very unpleasant thing to know and believe. And the more one dwells upon the subject, the more intense the clash becomes between one's emotional sentiments and beliefs, and ultimately, one either learns how to correctly harmonize between the two or falsely allows one of the two to dominate and subdue the other; all done at the expense of reaching a balanced and emotionally-healthy and intellectually-honest stance on the subject.

In this lecture, my primary goal, inshallah, will be more focused on tackling this subject rationally. I already have a lecture called "Deconstructing Religious Pluralism" on youtube, which you may be interested in checking out, as it's closely related to this subject, and I don't plan on repeating most of what I already said there.

In this lecture, however, I specifically wish to address the most common and central objections to the notion of hell. I'll seek to defend the idea that there is no logical contradiction in the notion of an All-Good, All-Merciful, and All-Just God punishing people in hell forever for holding wrong religious beliefs. So yes, I'll be going the whole nine yards in defending the orthodox Islamic stance concerning this subject. I will not be resorting to this growingly weak, and quite frankly, desperate appeal to the idea that Islam teaches that the punishment of hell is temporary, nor will I be resorting to a growingly popular modern escapist tactic of illegitimately overextending the scope of who qualifies to be considered amongst the Ahlul Fatrah, whereby we become extremely lax when it comes to the excuses afforded to non-Muslims who willingly choose to reject Islam.

I don't promise that you'll emotionally like everything that I have to say in this talk, but I feel confident, inshallah, that on purely intellectual grounds alone, that you'd be forced to at least rationally grapple and contend with the arguments and ideas I'll be laying out, especially since they have been tried and tested in the philosophical literature and have withstood the scrutinous test of time.

## **How to Emotionally Engage With the Subject of Hell**

Before I start, a couple of things need to first be said about emotions as an epistemological tool or utility of knowledge. I don't want to spend too much time on this because I'm confident that the bulk of you listening to this are wary and intelligent enough to know that our mere feelings alone do not *necessarily* serve as good, let alone definitive proofs regarding how we should perceive the *morality* of something. Sure, sometimes they could. For example, let's say everyone around the world feels absolutely morally repulsed about a certain thing. That could be a pretty good argument for the moral abhorrence of that thing, especially if there is no shred of evidence to counter that shared universal sentiment towards that thing.

However, when it comes to emotional sentiments, we need to be careful and ensure that we distinguish between moral repulsion and natural distaste. We may, as Allah سبحانه وتعالى says, have a natural distaste for fighting (كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الْقِتَالُ وَهُوَ كَرْهٌ لَّكُمْ),<sup>1</sup> but that doesn't mean that we have an inherent moral repulsion against fighting per se, for our intellect does inform us that fighting is sometimes morally good, and even necessary. Yes, we may not like the bloodshed and violent aspects of fighting, but that does not necessitate that we equally and concurrently deem them to be morally blameworthy.

We also need to distinguish between moral repulsion and emotional endurance. For example, one may not emotionally endure watching an animal getting slaughtered for food. The person is too squeamish, perhaps. Or maybe the individual is worried he or she would get nightmares, or whatever reason there may be. That alone does not entail that the person deems animal slaughter to be morally objectionable. In fact, that same person may happily gobble down the meat of the slaughtered animal for dinner.

Similarly, Allah سبحانه وتعالى states in the Qur'an that the punishment for fornicators is a hundred lashes, and right after He states:

وَلَا تَأْخُذْكُمْ بِهِمَا رَأْفَةٌ فِي دِينِ اللَّهِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ

And do not let your pity for them make you compromise the deen of Allah by failing to enforce the law of Allah if you believe in Allah and the Last Day.<sup>2</sup>

And Qur'anic exegetes such as Imam al-Qurtubi here have said that natural emotions such as pity, even for sinners such as fornicators, isn't what is haram here. Rather, what is haram is if those emotions get too carried away in swaying you to disobey the commands of Allah سبحانه وتعالى. For instance, we may acknowledge and be fully comfortable with the idea that some criminals deserve to be executed, yet, we can't stomach witnessing the actual execution. It's too emotionally overbearing for many of us. And that's completely natural and okay, as long as that doesn't wrongly influence our *moral* judgments about the matter. What you can or cannot stomach is not a yardstick for what is deemed to be moral.

Imagine witnessing all those people dying in the flood during Prophet Nuh's (عليه السلام) time? Or during the earthquake during Prophet Salih's (عليه السلام) time? Or when the brimstone fell on the people of Lot

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<sup>1</sup> 2:216

<sup>2</sup> 24:2

(عليه السلام)? Most of us would not relish in actually watching these people die in this manner; nevertheless, we recognize as Muslims that these punishments are historically real and just.

And hell is no different. Many of us may not bear seeing or imagining anyone in hell, but for Allah سبحانه it's easy, as He says:

فَسَوْفَ نُصَلِّيهِ نَارًا وَكَانَ ذَلِكَ عَلَى اللَّهِ يَسِيرًا<sup>3</sup>

سبحانه وتعالى. It's easy for Allah to put people in hell, but we are not Allah.

So, the point I'm trying to make is that we need to be self-cognizant of the various levels of our emotions. I am not arguing that we shouldn't get emotional about the subject of hell, for it is an emotionally taxing topic. On the contrary, having a strong emotional reaction when engaging with the topic of hell is not only understandable but a sign of Iman. It's a sign that you're not merely deeming hell to be some abstract and intellectual exercise that you're simply philosophizing about.

There's a hadith that states that the angel Mikaa'eel (عليه السلام) stopped laughing ever since hell was created. This is a distressing subject, and we should obviously be very concerned about ourselves and our loved ones. We should be filled with all sorts of emotions when engaging with this extremely critical subject. We must not be emotionally indifferent to it.

What I'll be contending is that we shouldn't be feeling morally repulsed about the idea of hell, specifically the Islamic conception of it. Obviously, I'm a Muslim, and I'm not setting out to argue on behalf of all conceptions of hell out there. So, kind of similar to the problem of evil, I'll be arguing that the challenge posed by the problem of hell is, in fact, more emotional rather than logical.

With that said, I will also be making a conscious effort to avoid using emotionally laden rhetoric in this talk. I was hesitant, and still am hesitant about this approach, out of fear and concern that I overly 'academize' and 'intellectualize' the topic of hell. As Shaykh Sultan Al-Umayri, professor of theology at Umm al-Qurra University, said in one of his lectures, there is a concern of overly academizing subjects such as hell, the punishment of the grave, the Day of Judgment, etc. to the point where we are lacking in taqwa or God-fearing sentimental reactions we should be having in response when these topics are brought up.

However, at the same time, there are certain settings where this approach is called for. And since I'm primarily setting out to contribute to a fard kifayah or an Islamic communal obligation of addressing objections to this Islamic doctrine, I will have to primarily resort to engaging with this topic rationally. Thus, it's incumbent to all listeners to not only listen to this lecture on the subject of hell but to listen to other heart-softener lectures out there in order to strike and attain that intellectual and spiritual balance.

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<sup>3</sup> 4:30

## The Kind of Justice Hell Fulfils

Now, with that said, I'd first like to spend some time highlighting the conception of hell that I'll be defending. The first point is that hell is a retributive punishment for failing to accept the religion of Islam without a valid excuse according to the criteria laid out by Allah سبحانه وتعالى.

Now, when we say "retributive punishment," as in contrast to "reformatory punishment," we mean that the primary purpose of hell *as a punishment for disbelief* isn't to reform and purify the kafir, but rather to serve as a just penalty for the crime of kufr. It is a punishment that is deserved and merited, meaning it is intrinsically fitting that those who died upon disbelief incur such a punishment.

The underlying purpose of retributive punishments is to restore moral order, so to speak. When a crime is committed against somebody, the person who committed the crime undermined and devalued the victim. For moral order to be restored, the criminal must face a consequence that exhibits and demonstrates to everybody that what he did was wrong. And that consequence must be in the form of a punishment or penalty that adequately and fairly reflects the severity and extent of the crime that was committed and offset it for justice to be restored. That very restoration of moral order and affirmation of the value of justice is a praiseworthy thing to be pursued in and of itself. It is inherently the right thing to do, and thus aspire towards actualizing, regardless of any consequences, such as whether the criminal is reformed or not.

Thus, hell as a punishment for disbelief is not primarily meant to have consequentialist outcomes such as the rehabilitation of the kafir or to merely serve as some kind of deterrence or any other purpose but is rather a punishment that is meted out against those who are worthy of it and is done to satisfy the demands of justice. The justice being retributive, not restorative.

Punishing people for the crime of kufr with hell is not ultimately remedial in its intent and effect, but rather justice-serving. Again, I'm specifically speaking about hell applied as a punishment against kuffar for the crime of kufr, not Muslim sinners who may enter hell temporarily.

Now, in theory, a punishment could serve two benefits simultaneously, namely, enacting retributive justice *and* seeking to rehabilitate the criminal. Even in human administrations of justice, we seek to protect society from criminals, maintain social order, deter people from engaging in criminal acts, and help criminals rehabilitate and reintegrate back into society. All those consequential motives of the criminal justice system are well recognized. There's no issue there. But to say that restorative or consequentialist-driven justice is the only or even primary goal of justice is problematic. Because if that were the case, then it's possible to achieve those objectives by meting out what we would all find to be disproportionate punishments to people.

For example, let's say that the punishment for rape is that the rapist pays the victim 90% of all his money for the rest of his life. One could try to argue that this is a pretty good deterrent from committing rape, but most of us would argue that even if it is a good deterrent, it's not just because a financial penalty, even a

really heavy one, doesn't suffice for punishing people who commit the extremely serious and disgusting crime of rape. The physical and mental harm inflicted upon the rape victim cannot be justly accounted for merely through the implementation of a financial penalty. On the flip side, however, one may argue that the punishment for a rapist could be castration and brutal non-stop torture for ten years non-stop. Now we could all agree that this is a very strong deterrent, but is it truly just and proportionate as a punishment, or is it over the top?

Let's take another example. Let's think of jaywalking. Let's say the fine for jaywalking is 500 US dollars. Most would argue that this seems pretty fair; however, is it really a strong deterrent for a billionaire? Hardly. But at the same time, do we really believe it's fair and just to fine billionaires hundreds of millions of dollars for jaywalking, simply because we believe that *would* be an effective deterrent discouraging billionaires from jaywalking? As much as many of us may not like many of the billionaires out there, I think we'd all agree that this wouldn't really be just, even to them.

Now, why am I bringing all this up? I'm bringing this up to make clear the fact that punishments and penalties do not *only* factor consequences into the equation. Punishments and penalties must be deserving and proportionate to the crime committed. They must be inherently just and not be sheerly consequentialist-driven in their intended goals.

## What Islam Teaches About Hell

And the punishment of hell in Islam is no different when it comes to punishing people for kufr.

Allah سبحانه وتعالى says about people in hell:

هَلْ تُجْزَوْنَ إِلَّا مَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ

Are you recompensed except for what you used to do?<sup>4</sup>

In other words, hell is your just and due punishment.

Now, let's go over some textual proofs demonstrating that the punishment of hell is everlasting for kuffar. Here are some:

- Hadith from Sahih Muslim where the Prophet (peace be upon him) is reported to have said:

يُدْخِلُ اللَّهُ أَهْلَ الْجَنَّةِ الْجَنَّةَ وَيُدْخِلُ أَهْلَ النَّارِ النَّارَ ثُمَّ يَقُومُ مُوَدِّنٌ بَيْنَهُمْ فَيَقُولُ يَا أَهْلَ الْجَنَّةِ لَا مَوْتَ وَيَا أَهْلَ النَّارِ لَا مَوْتَ كُلُّ خَالِدٍ فِيمَا هُوَ فِيهِ

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<sup>4</sup> 27:90

Allah would admit the inmates of Paradise into Paradise and the inmates of Hell into Hell. Then the announcer would stand between them and say: O inmates of Paradise, there is no death for you. O inmates of Hell, there is no death for you. **You would live forever therein.**

Another hadith clarifies that this statement made by the caller is made **after** death itself is symbolically slaughtered. In a hadith in Saheeh al-Bukhari, we read that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said:

"When the people of Paradise have entered Paradise, and the people of the Fire have entered the Fire, **death will be brought and will be placed between the Fire and Paradise, and then it will be slaughtered**, and a call will be made (that), 'O people of Paradise, no more death! O people of the Fire, no more death! ' So the people of Paradise will have happiness added to their previous happiness, and the people of the Fire will have sorrow added to their previous sorrow."

So, reading these ahadith together, we see that it is clearly established that both the people of paradise and people of hell will never die. Why? **Because the very notion of human death itself has been brought to an end.** It's not a conditional statement that says that the people of hell will not die only as long as they are in hell, but perhaps hell's existence itself is temporary, and so the people of hell would perish along with it as well. No, rather, since the very notion of human death itself has been brought to an end, there will be no death for those people, period. Otherwise, the bringing of the end of death itself, as stated in the hadith, would make no sense.

Now, someone may try to say, well, okay, the people of hell won't be annihilated. Fine, they will live forever, granted. But maybe they will leave hell one day and enter paradise? And when the Prophet (peace be upon him) said that they would live forever, خالد in hell, perhaps he meant just a really long time for the people of hell.

Keeping the very stretched reading of this hadith aside, Allah سبحانه وتعالى states very clearly in Surat al-'Araf, ayah 40 that the people of hell will never enter paradise. He says:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِنَا وَاسْتَكْبَرُوا عَنْهَا لَا تُفْتُحُ لَهُمُ أَبْوَابُ السَّمَاءِ وَلَا يَدْخُلُونَ الْجَنَّةَ حَتَّى يَلِجَ الْجَمَلُ فِي سَمِّ الْخِيَاطِ وَكَذَلِكَ نَجْزِي الْمُجْرِمِينَ

Surely those who receive our revelations with denial and arrogance, **the gates of heaven will not be opened for them, nor will they enter Paradise until a camel passes through the eye of a needle.** This is how We recompense the wicked.

Now, in this ayah, Allah سبحانه وتعالى is saying that they will enter paradise only until a camel passes through the eye of a needle. In other words, absolutely never! Why? Well, since a camel is obviously too big to pass through the extremely tiny eye of a needle, that clearly suggests that it will never happen.

Again, this is reinforced by Allah سبحانه وتعالى words in Surat al-Baqara, ayah 167:

The 'misled' followers will cry, "If only we could have a second chance, we would disown them as they disowned us." And so Allah will make them remorseful of their misdeeds. **And they will never 'be able to' leave the Fire.**

So, the people of hell will 1) never die, and 2) never enter paradise, and 3) never leave the fire. Three explicit statements, when brought together, leaves us with one clear conclusion, namely that the kuffar of hell will remain in hell endlessly.

Another proof is a very lengthy hadith in Saheeh al-Bukhari. It concerns the intercession of the Prophet (peace be upon him) for the dwellers of hell in the afterlife. In the hadith, it is mentioned that the Prophet (peace be upon him) will keep coming back and interceding until after he does so for the fourth time, he says:

مَا بَقِيَ فِي النَّارِ إِلَّا مَنْ حَبَسَهُ الْقُرْآنُ وَوَجِبَ عَلَيْهِ الْخُلُودُ

'No one remains in Hell but those whom the Qur'an has imprisoned (in Hell) and who have been destined to an obligatory everlasting stay in Hell.

Imam Al-Bukhari said that the statement of the Prophet (peace be upon him) "but those whom the Qur'an has imprisoned," refers to the statement of Allah سبحانه وتعالى in the Qur'an: خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا. And Qatadah said that this necessities everlastingness (خلود)

So the hadith is clear that the Prophet (peace be upon him) himself understood the Qur'an to be teaching that there are those who are محبوسون or imprisoned in hell who would not get out even after he exhausted his efforts at intercession and that خلود or everlastingness was their ultimate fate.

Moreover, Allah سبحانه وتعالى states regarding the disbelievers in Surat Hud, ayah 16:

أُولَٰئِكَ الَّذِينَ لَيْسَ لَهُمْ فِي الْآخِرَةِ إِلَّا النَّارُ وَحَبِطَ مَا صَنَعُوا فِيهَا وَبَاطِلٌ مَّا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ

**It is they who will have nothing in the Hereafter except the Fire.** Their efforts in this life will be fruitless, and their deeds will be useless.

We also read in Surat an-Nisa, ayah 121:

أُولَٰئِكَ مَأْوَاهُمْ جَهَنَّمُ وَلَا يَجِدُونَ عَنْهَا مَحِيصًا

It is they who will have Hell as their abode, **and they will find no escape from it!**

Pretty clear ayah, it's not saying that they will have *both* hellfire and paradise, but rather, *only* the hellfire.

So, we have established that not only will the people of hell never die, thus disproving the idea that Islam teaches annihilationism, the idea that the people of hell will be exterminated permanently from existence. We've also demonstrated that they will never enter paradise either.

Well, they must still be alive somewhere, and that somewhere is hell.



## Can Beliefs Alone Be Subject to Moral Evaluation?

Now, let's touch upon the subject of morality of beliefs. When thinking of morality and ethics, many tend to think of actions and speech rather than beliefs detached from actions and speech. So you'll find many people saying things like: "Hey, I don't care what you believe. As long as you don't harm others through your actions and words." Or something to that effect.

But how about mere beliefs themselves? Could simply having a wrong belief about something, even if not expressed or acted upon, be morally praiseworthy or blameworthy? Doesn't human intuition tend to value speech and actions more than the mere beliefs of an individual? And if that is the case, then why would a sinful Muslim who merely has a correct belief about God be better than a very generous, kind, and loving non-Muslim who happens to hold a faulty belief about God?

Okay, so, first, let's tackle the issue of whether beliefs could be inherently immoral in and of themselves.

One thing to consider right from the top is that beliefs form the basis for actions and speech. Let's say, for example, that there is somebody who is *completely* and *unconditionally* against the use of modern medicine. And as a result of this, he withholds necessary medical treatment from his extremely ill children who die as a consequence of this withdrawal. Given that the belief *itself* is the primary cause of the harmful action, it becomes difficult *not* to condemn the belief, along with the action as well.

Now, let me clarify something. This is not to say that any belief that has the potential to cause harm is worthy of condemnation because some beliefs are restrained by others. For example, if one merely held the belief that he opposes modern medicine and favors alternative medicine, *yet* in an emergency situation, he is willing to compromise out of sheer necessity to opt for modern medicine, then that's completely different. This is not the same thing as mentioned in the example that I gave where the person's beliefs are that modern medicine is to be avoided *completely* and *unconditionally* even if it results in death. And as shown, that belief in and of itself is morally blameworthy, and one who adopts that belief unjustifiably is likewise morally blameworthy. So as we saw, one correlation between beliefs and actions is that beliefs form the basis for actions. Thus, you can't just say that only harmful actions should be condemned while completely neglecting to also denounce the harmful beliefs that incited those harmful actions.

However, another correlation between the two is that actions themselves could result in the adoption of beliefs. In other words, beliefs could be a consequence of actions.

For example, let's say that a marketer or salesperson who works for a tobacco company willfully ignores all scientific research pointing to the harmful effects of cigarette smoking, and thus, in order to ease his conscience and continue working for the tobacco company, he adopts the false belief that smoking isn't that harmful. Or let's say that a doctor intentionally ignores all the medical research that demonstrates that prescribing a certain drug is ill-advised just so that he could continue prescribing it and earn an extravagant commission. Thus, for financial gain, both the marketer in the tobacco company and the doctor willfully adopt false beliefs in order to continue selling harmful products.

These false beliefs were a result of an action, namely the action of neglect, neglecting to know the truth. Neglecting to research and be open to the possibility that they may be doing something wrong.

And similarly, like in the previous modern medicine example, we can condemn those adopting these false beliefs because these beliefs were formed as a result of immoral actions, namely purposeful unwillingness to know the truth.

Take another example, let's say somebody spread false rumors about you and your character. He slandered you. And let's say that the people he spread them to believed what he said about you without questioning or seeking to ascertain the veracity of what he said. Nevertheless, to their credit, they didn't conduct any immoral action towards you based on those rumors, nor did they spread those rumors. They merely and only believed the rumors. Now the question is: can we hold them morally accountable for merely believing the rumors? Well, many would argue yes. And as Islam states, we need to have *husn adh-dhann* (or benefit of the doubt) and ensure we are cautious about blindly believing such unsubstantiated things about people.

Or let's say somebody holds racist beliefs yet never acted in a racist fashion against anybody. Never uttered a racial slur, never oppressed anyone on the basis of his race. Wouldn't we still consider that person to be morally blameworthy simply on account of holding such racist beliefs? Most of us would. We believe that the person, morally speaking, *ought* to not hold these beliefs, that the person *should* know better *not to* hold these beliefs about other people.

Or let's say somebody is a sadist who believes it okay to take pleasure in the suffering and torture of *even* innocent people. He doesn't believe that it's okay to actually torture innocent people but believes it's okay to enjoy watching the torture of innocent people. He harms no one. He doesn't even publicly say he is rejoicing in the suffering of others. He is not even paying money to access these torture videos. He keeps this belief to himself and does not encourage others to torture people. But surely, surely, we can still recognize that merely holding such sadistic beliefs is in and of itself morally and ethically wrong.

## Why Holding False Religious Beliefs Could Be Immoral

Now, having established that mere beliefs *alone*, detached from actions and speech, could be subject to moral assessment and evaluation, we can now turn to the question: Are our beliefs about God subject to moral appraisal? Is merely holding false beliefs about God morally blameworthy?

Now we said that beliefs could form the basis for actions, and we presented some examples showing how wrong beliefs could result in wrong actions. Similarly, holding a false belief about God could result in wrong actions such as Shirk, which is a grave crime, as it entails violating Allah's sole right to worship. I'll expound more after a while as to why Shirk is so evil of a crime inshallah.

Holding a false belief about God could also result in rejecting the mandates of God that He revealed through the correct revelation. It could also result in having a flawed moral compass rooted in a false moral standard that has no divine stamp of approval from Allah سبحانه وتعالى.

Such a faulty belief could also drive us to have a faulty understanding of the nature of our relationship to God. Are we God's servants, friends, His spiritual children, or all of these things, or some of these things, or none of these things?

Having wrong beliefs about God could end up situating us in a manner that incurs His wrath and displeasure. Thus, holding sound beliefs about God *is* a moral requirement as it serves as being a necessary precondition that enables us to correctly fulfill our obligations towards Him.

So, in a nutshell, can our beliefs alone be subject to moral evaluation and assessment? Is it sometimes critically important to have correct beliefs in order to be morally upright? The answer is a clear yes.

But one may insist that we've got it all wrong. That what is actually subject to moral evaluation is not the belief itself but rather *how* the belief was attained or retained. In other words, we don't pass moral judgments on beliefs themselves but rather on the belief formation process.

So, the doctor who kept prescribing the harmful drug isn't to be blamed for merely falsely believing that the harmful drug is good, but rather for *why* and *how* he continued to believe that the harmful drug is good, namely for financial gain and dishonest ignorance of the truth.

Similarly, these people raising this objection would say that holding a wrong belief about God isn't itself the problem, but rather *why* and *how* people hold these false beliefs *could* be the problem. So, for example, if a person *intentionally* and *knowingly* rejects the true religion of God, then, yes, he is to be condemned. But, if the person follows a false religion while being sincere in thinking that it's true, then he cannot be blamed for it. Why? Because the belief formation process itself is commendable. For as long as the person was sincere in choosing what he believed to be true about God, then we cannot fault that person.

Now, what does Islam say about this? Does it teach that "sincere kuffar" are necessarily excused? I have argued in a separate lecture, which you can find on youtube called "Deconstructing Religious Pluralism," that this is not the case. I've shown how the Qur'an itself doesn't simply excuse kuffar on account of their sincerity alone. I will not rehash that here for the sake of saving time, as this lecture is already going to turn out to be very lengthy as it is. One may refer to that lecture for the textual proofs, but for now, I'm going to be assuming that Islam does *not* teach that Allah excuses disbelief in Islam merely on account of sincerity.

So, is this problematic? Should people be morally excused simply on account of their sincerity? Well, I think with just a little contemplation, we could see that this isn't something intuitive. There are people who sincerely believe very disturbing things, and we don't excuse them for it. Think of anything that you hate; it could be racism, Zionism, colonialism, misogyny, islamophobia, etc. There are sincere advocates of these isms and beliefs. The idea that they *all* get some blanket excuse for merely being sincere in their convictions doesn't really sit well with most of us. Most of us recognize that people can be blamed for putting themselves in a situation where they have ended up being duped, albeit sincerely, into adopting morally unacceptable beliefs.

Inshallah, I will be expounding more on this “sincerity objection” later in the lecture.

## Do We Control Our Beliefs?

But one may object by saying that people don’t choose their beliefs. There’s no on and off switch for believing what we do. We do not control our beliefs in the same way we control our limbs. I can choose in an instant to raise my arm up, but I can’t do the same with my beliefs. I can’t just choose to believe something. So, isn’t it unfair for God to punish someone with hell for something he cannot control?

Okay, several comments are in order here.

We need to differentiate between having *direct* control over our beliefs and *indirect* control over our beliefs. Direct control over our beliefs would be something like believing at the snap of my finger that the sky is, in fact, green, not blue. Yes, most would agree that we, generally speaking, do not have *that* kind of control over our beliefs. You can’t just believe something like *that* at will.

Nevertheless, there are cases or examples that could be furnished demonstrating that we could have direct control over our beliefs. You know how sometimes we say things like, “I want to believe this is true.” Or “Today, I am choosing to believe in myself, in my capabilities.” Or a friend tells you, “I know this doesn’t make sense, but I really need you to believe me right now.” And you say, “Okay, I’ll believe you.” And so on. Right, so we kind of have this idea of *choosing* to believe things.

Some examples to consider here would involve when you have a stake in the truth of something. Take, for example, somebody who’s trapped in a well in the middle of nowhere. He chooses to believe because he *wants* to believe that he will be rescued. He is not basing this on any evidence. Rather, he wants to believe he will be rescued because if he doesn’t, the alternative outcome would be too grim for him to handle and would only demoralize him. So in order to not feel panicked and depressed, and in order to feel optimistic, he *chooses* to believe that he will be rescued.

At other times, we may knowingly suppress information and believe to the contrary of what that information is conveying. For example, some people are *willingly* in denial about certain things. They intentionally refuse to allow themselves to believe something. Imagine a mother who has a child who she knows deep down inside is using drugs when she’s outside the house. She knows that if she chooses to believe that he is doing drugs, then her relationship with him would crumble. But out of love and for the sake of having a healthy relationship with her son, she chooses to suppress that information and willingly believes that her son isn’t doing drugs just in order to maintain that healthy relationship with her son. That is psychologically possible.

We can also imagine choosing to believe things out of pragmatism or convenience. For example, an employee working at a company could see that the work environment is really horrible, but in order to cope better and motivate himself to pull through going to work each day, he manages to convince himself and ‘believe’ that his workplace environment isn’t actually that bad.

We can also imagine someone choosing to believe in something in order to ease his conscience. Imagine somebody did something really bad, and he's feeling very guilty about it. The guilt is just eating him up alive. Well, in order to make himself feel better, he begins to convince himself that what he actually did wasn't so bad after all. And he does this by trying to modify his previous moral stance on that matter.

More examples can be offered, but I hope the gist of what I'm trying to get at is clear.

To say that we do not have direct control over our beliefs is not clearly *unconditionally* true. At least, several human experiences don't seem to lay testament to that. Sometimes, we consciously choose to believe things and people, not because the evidence was so powerful enough to compel us to believe (like how we are compelled to believe that  $1+1=2$ , as there's no escaping having that knowledge), but rather choose to believe out of love, out of maintaining relationships, out of optimism, out of mercy, out of psychological need, out of our mental and spiritual well-being, out of saving our marital relationships, etc.

Whoever makes the unconditional blanket claim that we do not have direct control over our beliefs *at all* would need to provide some evidence for it.

Secondly, even if we grant that we do not have direct control over our beliefs, we most certainly *do have indirect* control over our beliefs. This is hardly disputed, and virtually every philosopher would agree with this. So, for example, I could *choose* to research and better investigate a certain topic, or I could *choose* to neglect to do so. And it's pretty obvious that researching and knowing more about a given topic could play an influential role in shaping my views and opinions about that given subject.

Another way we have indirect control over our beliefs is that we can choose to put ourselves in situations and circumstances that demotivate and hinder our ability to change our beliefs. Perhaps living in a particular environment or working in a particular job, or befriending or marrying particular people would make it increasingly difficult for us to change our beliefs. Yet, many are *willingly* putting themselves in those situations, or at the very least, willingly *remaining* in such circumstances.

Some who object to the notion of hell argue that it's easier said than done for people to change their circumstances, that it's not always psychologically or physically easy to make decisions requiring significant transformational changes.

Now, there's no denying that there could be cases like that. However, we have to be careful about being too lax on people by affording them excuses that they do not deserve.

It's easy to say that one isn't responsible for what he has no control over, but what if that lack of control only came about as a consequence of irresponsible *voluntary* past decisions that were made? Let's say a father has no money and isn't able to feed his family. Some may say, "Come on. He isn't able to feed his family; you can't criticize him. It's not like he has the ability to do so but refuses." But then we say: okay, hold on. Why is the father in that situation? Is it because he lost his job due to an economic crisis that was beyond his control, and there was no one to help him? Or was it because he recklessly gambled all his

money down the drain and is left broke as a result of that, with his family bearing the consequences as well? There's a big difference.

Or let's say you have a heavily drunk person who cannot control himself while he's driving very fast. You shout at him to stop on the side of the road, but he's unable to and recklessly swerves, hits the pavement, and injures everybody in the car. Now, technically, he could say in his defense that he had no control *at the time you shouted at him* to stop, that he didn't *willingly* injure everybody in the car. However, we all know that he is still to blame because he did have the ability and control to avoid knowingly getting heavily drunk with the intention to drive later.

Similarly, let's say you have somebody who works for a criminal organization. As a member of this criminal organization, he has no choice but to torture innocent people. He really has no choice. However, he did willingly join that criminal organization. And he does willingly remain in it. But as long as he's part of it, he's forced to torture innocent people. Can we not blame him for willingly putting himself in a situation where he's coerced to torture people? Absolutely, of course we can.

The same thing applies when it comes to our character. Let's say somebody has really serious anger issues. Do we excuse him because he cannot 'control' his anger? Well, how about when he's calm and collected and fully aware that he has serious anger issues? Did he not have the ability to take anger management classes, or at the very least, research on google tips on how to self-contain one's anger? Sure, he did. But he chose not to. He chose to be okay with having serious anger issues, even at the expense of continuing to emotionally or possibly even physically harming people as a result of his extreme anger.

We have to understand that we indirectly have control and influence over our psychological and spiritual conditions over the course of time.

Just as you can take courses to harness your logic to better avoid committing logical fallacies, and just as you can influence your weight through dieting and exercising, and just as you can take training courses to develop soft skills like negotiating, management, etc. you can also influence the formation and development of your character and spiritual state over time. Each time you resist to sin, you strengthen and train your will to resist for the future as well. The more you resist to sin, the easier it becomes to resist again and again.

Many of us *can* choose our friends, *can* choose our circumstances, *can* choose several factors that influence our decisions somewhere down the line.

The more you squander away opportunities to do good and opt for chances to do bad, the more accustomed you would become to engaging in this. It could reach the point where there's no turning back even. You may even reach a point where you freely commit evil actions till you reach a threshold where there's no coming out of it, and that's where Allah سبحانه وتعالى prevents guidance for some people and seals their hearts. Kind of similar to a drug addict who keeps taking drugs till he reaches a point of uncontrollable addiction, yet it was free will that gradually led that person into that state of lack of control.

It's no different with beliefs and searching for religious truth. There may be people who intentionally make themselves ignorant of things they are morally obligated to know in the name of some "ignorance is bliss" attitude or heedlessness or whatever reason. So it's not a simple matter of saying, "Well, we can't blame that person for being a kafir, because he was ignorant." But *why* was he ignorant? Is his ignorance a result of previous immoral and reckless decision making, which led to it, or not? It's important that this is addressed, as ignorance isn't always morally blameless, as we've already clearly shown.

Let's say a racist juror believed that the black defendant was guilty even before the trial began. He couldn't help but believe it. He's a racist who's been indoctrinated to have such prejudicial beliefs about black people. You can't just tell him at that point in time to just stop believing in such a prejudicial fashion, and in an instant, he just stops. It's beyond his control. And we can't judge a person for things beyond their control, right? Wrong, as that person had a lifetime of opportunity to critically question those racist beliefs of his before he was chosen to be part of the jury for that trial.

Similarly, when people are not able to change their beliefs at a given point in time, we must ask why? And ask whether reckless decision-making and carelessness, and indifference to the truth lead to that lack of control or not.

It's important to understand that moments of decision-making are not single precise moments. There is a whole lifetime of decision-making that influences and shapes our characters and beliefs. Every moral and spiritual decision that we've ever made over the passage of time plays a role in constituting who we are today.

Now, with all that said, we can better understand why it could be under people's control to choose kufri beliefs about Allah سبحانه وتعالى. After all, Allah سبحانه وتعالى does command the disbelievers to believe in Him and His Messenger, فآمنوا بالله ورسوله.<sup>5</sup> Someone might read this ayah and say: how can someone be commanded to just believe? Well, as we just saw, it's very reasonable to understand how, in fact, one could control what he or she believes.

## **Blameworthiness for Failing to Believe Correctly**

Now, since we established that it's possible to understand how people *can* control their beliefs, what does Islam say about the blameworthiness of people who fail to believe in the correct religion?

It's important to understand that there is a direct correlation between one's role and one's obligations. You see, a doctor, by virtue of his role as a doctor, has an obligation to know the best treatment for his patients. Likewise, a teacher, by virtue of him being a teacher, has an obligation to know how to best teach his students. Similarly, a parent has an obligation to know how to raise his children. And so on. Similarly,

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<sup>5</sup> 3:179 & 4:171

human beings have a role to play by virtue of them being human free agents when it comes to knowing how to acknowledge and serve God.

We already discussed the importance of having correct beliefs about God. If one believes in God, as the vast majority of people do, then he would want to find out what God has to say about the purpose of our lives, how to treat people, whether there is salvation, whether God is pleased with us or not, whether we are indebted to God for our existence, etc. It's the duty of man to find out what his duties are. There's a lot at stake here, and the more there is a stake in something, the more crucial it is that we have correct beliefs concerning that thing.

Based on what we said earlier about belief control, we could imagine that there are people who willingly choose to blindly stick to their religion in order to maintain relationships with their families and friends, as they feel that converting to Islam may compromise their familial ties. There are those who willingly stick to their kufr out of love for their tradition.

People could be kuffar because they are not willing to investigate the truth claims of other religions; they *choose* not to. It could be out of indifference or unjustified misplaced overconfidence in their current faith. Regardless, a decision was made not to expose themselves to evidence for Islam, which they could evaluate. It was under their control whether to inquire further or not about religious truth claims, but they *willingly* refused to do so.

There are those who willingly reject Islam for a host of reasons, but the point is that it's conceivable for us to imagine that people could *willingly* choose to believe something even if evidence per se isn't playing a role in their decision-making.

Secondly, people could be kuffar because they didn't take the duty of religious inquiry seriously enough. It's difficult to offer an objective, precise standard of what constitutes sufficient religious investigation, but perhaps one useful method would be to compare investigative standards each respective person typically applies to other matters—for example, buying or selling a house, investing a good portion of your money in certain stocks, choosing a spouse, relocating to a new country, quitting your job, etc.

We should contrast how much research and how factual people are when making decisions about some of the most important matters in their lives with their research into finding out what the true religion is. If they've devoted far less time to investigating religious truth than, say, deciding which new car to buy, then that says something about how important that person deems inquiry of religious truth to be. And yes, as a result, that person could be held morally culpable for carelessness in holding wrong religious beliefs. That person would not be justified in thinking that he's justified in holding the beliefs that he does.

Or contrast how one spends his free time spending hundreds, if not thousands, of hours watching movies and playing video games, compared to dedicating time to contemplating about his purpose in life. And so on.

الَّذِينَ اتَّخَذُوا دِينَهُمْ لَهْوًا وَلَعِبًا وَغَرَّتْهُمْ الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا



Those who took their religion lightly and as a game and were deluded by the dunya.<sup>6</sup>

## Whom Allah Chooses to Guide

Now, back to Islam's perspective. Islam teaches that Allah's guidance is a key factor in both becoming guided *to* Islam and remaining guided *in* Islam. Allah states:

وَمَا كَانَ لِنَفْسٍ أَنْ تُؤْمِنَ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ

And it is not for a soul to be able to have Iman, except by Allah's permission.<sup>7</sup>

Islam does not teach that accountable people have full control over their beliefs, but only that they have sufficient control to the point where they could be held accountable for their beliefs.

وَمَا تَشَاؤُونَ إِلَّا أَنْ يَشَاءَ اللَّهُ

And you cannot will something unless Allah wills it.<sup>8</sup>

Allah's guidance does not entail Him forcibly making one believe. Rather, for Allah to guide a person, that person must, himself, *will* to believe.

فَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُؤْمِنْ وَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُكْفُرْ

Whoever wills to believe, let them believe, and whoever wills to disbelieve, let them disbelieve.

وَالَّذِينَ جَاهَدُوا فِينَا لَنَهْدِيَنَّهُمْ سُبُلَنَا

And whoever strives in our cause or path, we shall guide them.<sup>9</sup>

كَلَّا إِنَّهَا تَذْكِرَةٌ ﴿١١﴾ فَمَنْ شَاءَ ذَكَرْهُ

This is only a reminder. So whoever wills will pay heed to it.<sup>10</sup>

And there are several other ayat to that effect.

So Allah guides those who truly wish to seek the truth.

Guidance from Allah تعالى سبحانه as clarified by the ulama involves making the truth clearer to the person. And easing and facilitating the path to acquiring the truth. It also involves Allah giving the individual the inner strength to accept the truth in the face of obstacles. We can understand Allah's guidance as Him

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<sup>6</sup> 7:51

<sup>7</sup> 10:100

<sup>8</sup> 81:29

<sup>9</sup> 29:69

<sup>10</sup> 74:54-55

actualizing circumstances to enable people to make correct decisions in their religious inquiry whereby He enables their motivations to be further inclined to seek the truth.

We need to understand something here. Who are the people that are accountable in Islam? They are those whom the message of Islam has reached and are intellectually capable of understanding it and engaging in the required process of reflecting upon it and subsequently either accepting or rejecting it without any serious threat to their wellbeing.

They must be able to engage in contemplation about the message of Islam, which would then serve as a causal stimulus to them embracing it. The critical contemplation or reflection process would involve mental questions such as: “Are there good reasons for me to embrace Islam?”, “Have I properly understood what Islam teaches?”, “What commitments and sacrifices would I be required to make when I convert to Islam?”, etc.

Just as we have control over our weight by forming intentions to exercise and eat fewer calories, there is also that control to believe things by forming intentions to reflect upon them. And as said earlier, Islam teaches that Allah سبحانه وتعالى would assist that process of reflection and embracement of the truth if the will to seek the truth is *truly* there. So the control that the human being has is the intention to engage in serious, reflective inquiry of religious truth, while the final result involving discovering the truth and embracing it with its settlement in the heart is by the guiding aid of Allah سبحانه وتعالى.

Allah can enable and assist the person to have correct desires and inclinations to seek the truth and resist temptations and obstacles that may hinder one’s journey to seeking the truth, but there must be that higher intention, that higher-order desire to truly seek the truth, and then the lower-order desires become aligned with that higher-order desire through Allah’s help.

What are higher-order and lower-order desires? Please pay very careful attention. If you’re multitasking while listening to me, that’s totally fine, but you’d probably just want to stop for five minutes. What I am going to say right now may sound complicated, but it really isn’t. If you just pay really close attention, then you’d easily get it the first time, inshallah. So, what are higher-order and lower-order desires? Higher or second-order desires are desires to have certain desires. For example, an example of a higher-order desire is: I desire to desire to eat healthy foods. So, not only do I want to eat healthy foods, but I also *want* to enjoy and crave healthy foods. Basically, you *want* to have the feeling of *wanting* something, not merely just wanting something. The lower-order or first-order desire is simply: I desire to eat healthy foods. Now it’s easy for lower-order desires to get influenced and manipulated if they are not strongly aligned with a higher-order desire. In other words, if you don’t truly *want* to desire and crave healthy foods, then your desire for healthy foods is more prone to alter under pressure and temptation.

Similarly, the same logic works when it comes to seeking religious guidance. The Prophet (peace be upon him) taught us to make the dua:

اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي أَسْأَلُكَ الثَّبَاتَ فِي الْأَمْرِ، وَأَسْأَلُكَ عَزِيمَةَ الرُّشْدِ،

Oh Allah, I ask you for firmness and consistency in this affair (meaning the ability to constantly practice and be committed to the deen), and I ask you for the determination to follow the right path.

So here, you can see that the dua involves invoking Allah سبحانه وتعالى to help us have the correct lower-order desires, namely continuously *wanting* to be consistent in following the deen.

We also make the dua:

اللهم ثبت قلوبنا على دينك

Oh Allah, make our hearts firm upon this deen.

Again, merely making this dua out of sincerity is an indication that there is a higher-order desire to want to follow the deen of Allah. The making of the dua is a reflection of a desire of desiring firmness upon the deen of Allah.

We also make other duas like:

اللَّهُمَّ حَبِّبْ إِلَيْنَا الْإِيمَانَ وَزَيِّنْهُ فِي قُلُوبِنَا، وَكَرِّهْ إِلَيْنَا الْكُفْرَ وَالْفُسُوقَ وَالْعِصْيَانَ، وَاجْعَلْنَا مِنَ الرَّاشِدِينَ

Oh Allah, make Iman beloved to us and adorn our hearts with it. And make detestable to us kufr, and fisq, and disobedience. And make us among those who are guided and upright.

Again, this dua is a dua to Allah سبحانه وتعالى to help us have the correct lower-order desires. We don't merely wish to have Iman. But rather, wish to always want Iman by loving it. To desire to have the desire of hating kufr and whatever displeases Allah.

There's also the dua:

اللَّهُمَّ أَعِنِّي عَلَى ذِكْرِكَ وَشُكْرِكَ، وَحُسْنِ عِبَادَتِكَ

Oh Allah, help me to remember you. And thank you. And worship you in a beautiful manner.

This is a beautiful dua. You're basically saying when you're making this dua: Oh Allah, I want to want to remember you. I want to want to thank you. I want to want to worship you in a beautiful manner.

The very fact that you're making all these kinds of duas sincerely is indicative of the fact that you have a higher-order desire to want to have the lower-order desires of remembering and thanking and worshipping Allah. You making the dua sincerely to want to love Iman is proof that *you want to want to love Iman*. So you have that higher-order desire.

These are the people whom Allah سبحانه وتعالى guides. They are the people who have the right sincere higher-order wills and desires. Allah will make things easier for them by strengthening their willpower to have the correct lower-order desires to align with and conform to those higher-order desires in order to please Him.

**You will *not* stop wanting to commit zina, unless you sincerely want to want to stop committing zina. And this goes for every other sin, including the worst one, Shirk. You keep committing a sin, and you say: "My willpower is too weak. I can't overcome my desires. I can't stop committing zina."**

**Okay, a sincere question to you: Do you really wish that your desire for zina comes to an end? Ask yourself that.**

Now at this point, you might be asking, why on earth is Bassam getting too philosophical about this and just complicating things?

Look, the point I'm essentially trying to make in the context of Allah guiding a non-believer to Islam is that the non-believer must have a higher-order desire to want to accept the truth at all costs. To truly want to submit to God even if it means conceding that he was wrong about his religious views all along. Even if it means having to change his moral paradigm, even if it means upsetting his family and friends, even if it means drastically changing his lifestyle. And if that higher-order desire is *truly* there, then Allah سبحانه وتعالى would enable that individual by strengthening his willpower and guiding his desires to take the measures necessary to acquire the truth of Islam. Allah would enable him to want to undergo his research correctly and in an unbiased fashion. Allah would assist him by emboldening him and instilling courage in him to want to confront his family and friends about the new deen he has embraced. In other words, Allah سبحانه وتعالى would guide him by helping him correct his lower-order desires.

This is the main point I wanted to reach, and I apologize if I have overcomplicated this, but I really wanted to find a way to make it clear that Allah's guidance involves guiding our desires and will, but that doesn't occur unless we have a higher-order desire for that divine guidance to occur. So the free will is there because having that higher-order desire is from us, but the correction of our lower-order desires is by Allah's assistance. Thus, this helps us understand how divine intervention does not compromise our free will.

Again, apologies if I have overcomplicated this, but it's really not that complicated. In case you didn't fully grasp what I've said, I'd recommend you rewind and listen to what I said again until you get it; I'm confident that you will.

فَمَنْ يُرِدِ اللَّهُ أَنْ يَهْدِيَهُ يَشْرَحْ صَدْرَهُ لِلْإِسْلَامِ

Whoever Allah wishes to guide; He expands his breast to Islam.<sup>11</sup>

Allah سبحانه وتعالى knows best who to guide and who to condemn to hell:

ثُمَّ لَنَحْنُ أَعْلَمُ بِالَّذِينَ هُمْ أَوْلَىٰ بِهَا صِلًى

We know who is most deserving of burning in hell.<sup>12</sup>

You don't know; Allah knows. He knows what each person was capable of doing and not doing. He knows how many opportunities were wasted to traverse the path of guidance. He knows what the *true* underlying motives of each individual were. He knows how heedless and sincere each person was. You don't know; He knows.

Allah سبحانه وتعالى states that He wouldn't bear people burdens that they are not able to bear.

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<sup>11</sup> 6:125

<sup>12</sup> 19:70

لَا تُكَلِّفُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا<sup>13</sup>

And on the Day of Judgment, those who do enter hell will concede that they were wrong and are worthy of blame. They won't be kicking and screaming that God was unfair to them, but rather that it was their fault.

وَقَالُوا لَوْ كُنَّا نَسْمَعُ أَوْ نَعْقِلُ مَا كُنَّا فِي أَصْحَابِ السَّعِيرِ

And they would say: Only if we had listened or used our intellect, we wouldn't have been from amongst the people of the fire.<sup>14</sup>

They failed to actualize their intellect's capacity to seeking God, and they acted irrationally by satisfying their short-term desires at the expense of the longer term.

They failed to use their reason to regulate their passions and desires.

يَا وَيْلَنَا قَدْ كُنَّا فِي غَفْلَةٍ مِنْ هَذَا بَلْ كُنَّا ظَالِمِينَ

Oh, woe to us, for we have been heedless of this. In fact, we were oppressors.<sup>15</sup>

يَحْسِرَتْنَا عَلَى مَا فَرَّطْنَا فِيهَا

Oh, how we regret being heedless about the Day of Judgment.<sup>16</sup>

There are several Qur'anic references alluding to this admission of guilt and regret by the kuffar in the afterlife. Their own limbs would testify against them on that day. All the evidence against them will be laid out that day. Every opportunity foregone to research about religious truth, every moment they decided to follow their desires, every instance they elevated their egos and found it beneath them to submit to moral dictates that didn't align with their predetermined standards of morality. All the evidence will be laid bare against them on the Day of Judgment, and they will not be able to refute it, nor would they be able to make a case that they are being unfairly judged.

And once we understand this and fully appreciate the justice and fairness underlying the notion of Allah guiding and misguiding people, then many of the objections that are raised automatically lose their force.

## Why Shirk is So Bad

With that said, let's try to get back to the subject of punishing kuffar with everlasting hell. One objection raised against the idea of punishing kuffar endlessly in hell is that if you take the least good Muslim who

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<sup>13</sup> 6:152

<sup>14</sup> 67:10

<sup>15</sup> 21:97

<sup>16</sup> 6:31

doesn't spend forever in hell and compare him to the least bad kafir who occupies hell for eternity, then the difference between these two people should be significant enough to warrant the infinite difference in treatment between them.

So, imagine that you have this horrible Muslim guilty of the worst of sins who only has a mustard seed of Iman compared to somebody like Abu Talib, the Prophet's (peace be upon him) uncle who helped the Prophet so much by lovingly supporting his upbringing and standing up for him and protecting him from the hostile Quraysh that mistreated him for preaching Islam. Well, how is it that this awful Muslim is treated infinitely differently than Abu Talib? Why does that tiny, minuscule mustard seed of Iman have such infinite ramifications in terms of one's everlasting destiny? Is the "least good person" in paradise *that much* different than the "least bad person" in hell?

One thing to bear in mind is that there are degrees of reward and punishment in heaven and hell, respectively. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said that there are a hundred levels in Jannah, with firdaws being the highest level. Similarly, there are degrees in hell. The Munafiqun are in the lowest levels of hell, as Allah سبحانه وتعالى states: *إِنَّ الْمُنَافِقِينَ فِي الدَّرَكِ الْأَسْفَلِ مِنَ النَّارِ*.<sup>17</sup> Other people of hell receive punishments that are lesser in gravity.

A number of ulama, such as Imam al-Bayhaqi and Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali, have said that the scholars have differed over whether the good deeds committed by the kuffar in this life could benefit them in the afterlife by having their punishment reduced. Their good works can never help them in getting their kufr and shirk forgiven and consequently them then shift to paradise out of hell; however, there is a difference of opinion that their good works could assist in the reduction of the intensity of their punishment in hell. So, not all kuffar are treated equally by being punished with the same level of intense harshness in hell.

However, the critic may insist that the difference between the least good Muslim and the least-worst kafir is eternity itself, as the least-worst kafir still endures everlasting punishment. Yes, the least-best Muslim may suffer for a lengthy period in hell, but he eventually comes out. So, how could the difference between the least good Muslim and least bad kafir, which may only amount to a minuscule mustard seed of Iman, have such infinitely profound differences. The critic may ask: isn't this a borderline case where the difference between the least good Muslim and the least bad kafir is so small to the point of not even being visibly identifiable; that the manner in which they are both treated lacks proportionality? How could something barely visible to the naked eye like a mustard seed of Iman be so morally significant with such ramifications?

Well, I think a number of points are in order here.

Firstly, something could be morally significant, even if its cut-off point cannot be precisely identified or visible to the naked eye. For example, what's the precise fine line between being generous and greedy in a given context? Or between being pragmatic and calculating and being a coward in the context of war or any kind of confrontation. Between being reckless and being brave? So, even though we cannot always

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<sup>17</sup> 4:145

clearly know the precise cut-off point delineating virtuous traits such as generosity and bravery from flawed traits such as cowardice and recklessness, the fact does remain that these cut-off points are morally significant. This is because we do care about striving for virtuosity and abstaining from the adoption of defective character traits. And by virtue of logical necessity, there has to be a cutoff point somewhere. Even if we can't see it or precisely point to it, we know it's there, and we know it matters.

Secondly, we frequently deal in our everyday lives with borderline cases. A student whose GPA score is just minutely higher than someone else's gets accepted into the better university. Or someone whose job resume is just minutely better than another candidate's gets the job. Or someone whose work performance is just minutely better gets the job promotion or salary raise, etc. And all these consequences have significant long-term effects. And we don't claim that people are being treated unfairly. We recognize that there needs to be cut-off points at some stage.

Now, one may object and say that we human beings have cut off points for things such as university admission and job promotions because we have to. We have limited capacities and resources, and so sheer necessity forces us to make these fine delineations between people. However, God isn't constricted in the same manner. He has limitless power and is capable of accommodating people without discriminating against them with such tight boundaries spacing them apart.

However, that response may work against the job promotion and GPA score examples I gave, but it doesn't work with the character traits examples that I've shown earlier. We've seen that sharp cut-off points could exist in a meaningfully morally significant way just by virtue of necessity. The existence of these cut-off points is not contingent upon anything; they necessarily exist. There necessarily has to be a point where one stops being honest and starts becoming a liar in certain circumstances. And the difference between honesty and dishonesty is morally significant, despite there being a minuscule fine line between the two and despite us perhaps not always being able to identify those cut-off points. But we know that, *in reality*, they exist, even if we may differ about how to identify them.

But the critic may still insist that even if a mustard seed of Iman does exist out of necessity as being the demarcating line between kufr and Iman, that this mustard seed of Iman is not so morally significant to the point of having *everlasting* implications for the kafir.

And the answer to that objection is to respond in turn by contending that the crime of kufr and Shirk itself, is the ultimate crime against Allah سبحانه وتعالى. Allah sees it as a great dhulm or oppression ( إِنَّ الشِّرْكَ لَظُلْمٌ عَظِيمٌ ).<sup>18</sup>

Now, understandably, human notions of justice are inseparable from human determinations of justice. And human determinations of justice are prone to error. We may be good at judging outward behavior, but we are unable to see a host of other things such as people's intentions, motives, regrets, etc., and all these constitute the *true* moral makeup of individuals. Similarly, when it comes to kufr and Shirk, we may fail to see its true ugliness when we look at the "least bad kafir," and even fail to appreciate the beauty

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<sup>18</sup> 31:13

and moral worth and value of that mustard seed of Iman that is so difficult to observe when we look at the “least good Muslim.”

Sometimes, human beings, Muslims included, fail to appreciate the gravity of sin. They aren’t looking at it the same way Allah سبحانه وتعالى is. For example, Allah سبحانه وتعالى said about the people who slandered Aisha (رضي الله عنها):

وَتَقُولُونَ بِأَفْوَاهِكُمْ مَا لَيْسَ لَكُم بِهِ عِلْمٌ وَتَحْسَبُونَهُ هَيِّنًا وَهُوَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ عَظِيمٌ

And you said with your mouths what you had no knowledge of and assume it’s something to be taken lightly while, in fact, it’s extremely serious in the sight of Allah.<sup>19</sup>

And this applies to other sins as well. As we all know, consuming riba is one of the seven worst sins in Islam. Imagine that, imagine, a respected banker actively engaging in all sorts of riba-promoting work, wearing a nice suit, living in a posh neighborhood, and driving a nice car, actually being more sinful, keeping all factors constant, than a thief or a prostitute. Do our societies today look at it that way? Is that something simple to digest for someone who’s been inculcated, socialized, and brainwashed into accepting the moral standards of our societies today?

There must be a certain level of conscious willingness on our part to remember that Allah سبحانه وتعالى is the ultimate moral standard and that we must strive and remind ourselves constantly that we need to view the world through the lens of the divine, rather than purely through our limited human perspectives.

Back to the topic at hand. Why is Shirk so bad? The Prophet (peace be upon him), as reported in Saheeh Al-Bukhari, asked one of his companions: "What is the biggest sin in the sight of Allah?" He said, "To set up rivals or those equal unto Allah, though He is the one who created you." (أَنْ تَجْعَلَ لِلَّهِ نِدًّا وَهُوَ خَلَقَكَ).

Shirk is essentially treating one in a manner that only Allah (سبحانه وتعالى) must be treated. The very purpose of our creation is to worship Allah, and so to worship other than Him is an inherent rejection of the very purpose of our being. Any act of worship should only be directed to Him. If it is directed to any other entity, then such an act is gravely misplaced. And the very definition of dhulm or oppression in Arabic is the situating of things out of their designated places.

Now, we don’t say that Allah is a “victim” of the oppressive act of Shirk. On the contrary, no one here is being oppressed other than the mushrik himself. As Allah سبحانه وتعالى states,

وَمَا ظَلَمُونَا وَلَكِنْ كَانُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ يَظْلِمُونَ

and they did not wrong us, but rather they only wronged themselves.<sup>20</sup>

Allah also states:

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<sup>19</sup> 24:15

<sup>20</sup> 2:57



مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلِنَفْسِهِ ۖ وَمَنْ أَسَاءَ فَعَلَيْهَا ۚ وَمَا رَبُّكَ بِظَلَّامٍ لِّلْعَبِيدِ

Whoever does good deeds, then it is for their own benefit. And whoever does evil, it is their own loss. Your Lord is never unjust to 'His' servants.<sup>21</sup>

So, just because Allah's (سبحانه وتعالى) rights and honor are being violated through the oppressive act of Shirk, He is not some victim who is harmed in any way as a result.

But again, why's it such a great act of oppression, especially to the one who engages in it? Ibnul Qayyim al-Jawziyyah makes an insightful comment. He says that oppression impedes or obstructs safety or security, and guidance. And Shirk is absolute oppression because it absolutely obstructs one's safety (from the wrath of Allah سبحانه وتعالى) and absolutely derails one off the path of guidance.

The person also oppresses himself through committing Shirk by situating himself in a manner of utmost servitude (because that's what worship is) to a helpless, dependent creature. It's inherently humiliating and denigrating to be in that state, even if the mushrik fails to see it.

Going back to the hadith, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said that the worst sin in Allah's sights is to set up rivals or those equal unto Allah, **though He is the one who created you** (وَهُوَ خَلَقَكَ). Shirk is so evil not only because worship is a right due to Allah alone, but its ugliness is magnified because the mushrik equalizes between Allah, who is the ultimate source of his existence, with the creation that is unable to even create a fly. He equalizes between Allah, who is the ultimate source of his sustenance, with entities that could barely help themselves. It's the pinnacle of ingratitude and treachery.

We know that there are rights owed to people by virtue of who they are. Be they our parents, our spouses, our children, etc. Think about a right you believe you're entitled to, whether it's loyalty from your spouse or respect and obedience from your children, wages from your employer, etc. Think about why you think you deserve those rights. And then imagine that the right of worship to Allah سبحانه وتعالى is just maximally greater than all that. Worship is an act that inherently entails the recognition of the maximally perfect being. To direct worship to a being that is not maximally perfect is a travesty of rights of utmost proportion.

The proportionality of a punishment for a crime factors into consideration just how significant the right being infringed upon is. Somebody trying to cut your hand off deserves to be punished more than somebody who tries to steal your money, as your right to your limb is more established than to your money. Similarly, the right that Allah has to be worshipped alone is a right that is the logical and necessary outcome of all His attributes combined. It is *the* most significant right a maximally perfect being such as Allah سبحانه وتعالى lays claim to, and its infringement is the most serious crime that could be committed as a result.

## Countering Objections That Hell Is a Disproportionate Punishment

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<sup>21</sup> 41:46

But still, there are those who would argue that the punishment of everlasting hell is disproportional to the crime of kufr. They would argue that kuffar only lived for a finite amount of time and engaged in their kufr in a finite time frame. Similarly, they would argue that this temporary crime of kufr only has temporary effects or consequences. They would say: it's not like kufr has caused God to be angry for all of eternity. They would also say, "whatever happened to the eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth rule"? If unrepentant and inexcusable kufr is a crime against God, then shouldn't the kafir suffer no more than how much "God has suffered?"

Okay, a number of responses.

First of all, the "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth" rule is one that applies to human beings. It's not universally applicable across all ontological kinds of nature. So, let's say a human being commits animal abuse and damages the eye or breaks the arm of a dog or a cat. Most of us do not say that the human being in question is therefore deserving of having his arm broken. Now, I know that there are some who are overly passionate about animal rights who might insist that animals and human beings should be treated equally, but the vast majority of people don't see it that way, and so I'm not going to spend time arguing why human beings and animals aren't equal.

The fact of the matter is that it is far from being obvious and intuitive that the "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth" rule is one that applies between all different ontological beings. And so if that is the case, then God, as a divine ontological being that has an essence not shared by humans, is not obviously subjected to the "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth" rule along with human beings as well. The one making that claim needs to offer evidence for that.

Secondly, regarding the claim that kufr only has temporary effects because it was a crime committed during a finite period of time, I'd like to say to the one raising this objection: how do you know that? How do you know? First of all, common sense tells us that the effects of actions could last much longer than the duration in which those actions were perpetrated. A straightforward example is rape. It can take a person a few minutes to rape somebody, but the scars and emotional pain and hurt that follow those horrendous few minutes would continue to affect the victim for much longer than a few minutes.

Similarly, when it comes to inexcusable and unrepentant kufr, how do you know that the effects of this kufr aren't everlasting in the sense that Allah سبحانه وتعالى will forever be angry at that crime? How do you know that? Who are you to say what God can be angry about for a limited or unlimited amount of time? What if Allah's anger at unrepentant unjustified Shirk is so intense that it never dissipates, and as a result of this perpetual unrelenting divine wrath, the punishment would likewise be interminable for causing this endless anger. How do you know that this *cannot* be the case? Can you prove it? Have you considered that maybe your moral sensibilities are too feeble to fully grasp and appreciate just how serious a crime like Shirk committed against someone as infinitely great as Allah truly is?

However, some would insist that God's judgments must at least resonate with us as human beings though; otherwise, how could we appreciate His Justice? And that's fine, but that doesn't mean that *all* of Allah's judgments must resonate with us *instantly*. Sometimes contemplation, sound reasoning, and detachment

from previously held beliefs and presuppositions are required in order to acquire a sound understanding and appreciation of God's judgments. And that's what we are trying to do as we contemplate about this subject.

Thirdly, it's important to consider not only the magnitude of the crime of Shirk but also consider the maximal worth and status of the one only God who has been offended against. Allah (وَتَعَالَىٰ سُبْحَانَهُ) is maximally perfect or infinitely perfect in a qualitative sense. When we say that Allah is maximally perfect, we mean to say that He is maximally quintessential in all His attributes. He is maximally perfect in His generosity, mercy, justice, power, knowledge, supremacy, etc. And that utmost magnificence of His attributes makes Him one with an infinitely qualitative status.

Building upon that, we could argue that guilt is proportional to the moral worth or status of the offended side. In other words, the severity of a crime is not only determined by how bad the crime itself is but also determined by who is being offended. So, for example, animal abuse is not at the same level of severity as human abuse. Why not? Well, because the moral worth or status or dignity of the human being is at a higher level than that of the animal. And so, the crime committed against the human being would be worse even if the same exact crime were committed against the animal.

Similarly, seeing that God is a being who is infinitely more worthy and dignified and greater than any other being, then the level of severity of a crime committed against God shouldn't be equalized with that committed against a human being. And as a result, the assessment of the seriousness of a crime committed against God shouldn't be subjected to human conceptions of justice that we are ordinarily accustomed to.

Now, people who advocate against the notion of everlasting punishment in hell raise some objections against this reasoning, which I laid out. The argument that I just laid out is commonly known in the literature as "The Status Principle."

One argument that they pose is that those classical theologians and philosophers who originally promoted The Status Principle argument were affected by the feudal societies in which they lived. So basically, they lived at a time where it was the norm to believe that a crime committed against the king, or even a noble, was more serious than a crime committed against peasants or anyone in a lower social-economic class and had a "lower status." But, today, we've grown out of this kind of way of thinking. We are now more "egalitarian," and we don't make such distinctions anymore, as we view all human life to be equal.

However, in response to that, I'd say that what I've already said is not affected by this in any way. I did not say that because there are certain human lives more worthy than other human lives, that we could then deduce from this that God is greater in status. No, rather, I said that different ontological natures are different from one another compared to each other. Humans are more worthy than animals, and animals are more worthy than plants, etc. And since God is not a human being, and is a unique being due to His unique divine essence, and is not like any of His creation (ليس كمثله شيء), it was thus contended that God's status is at a different level than human beings. So, whether you believe all human beings are equal in worth or not makes no difference to this argument.

Secondly, and I don't want to spend any considerable amount of time on this, as this is a separate subject. But, I'd argue that it's not even *that* rationally obvious that *all* human lives are of equal worth. Imagine a prophet of God was murdered. And then imagine that a criminal on death row who was fairly sentenced by a court of law to be executed was killed by another prisoner just 5 minutes before he was going to get executed. The prophet who was murdered is a human being. The murdered death row inmate was a human being. Are both of their lives truly equal in every sense in this case? Are both murders *equally* horrid and morally blameworthy? Keeping religious beliefs aside, I'd argue that it's not that rationally obvious that these two acts of murder are *equally* bad. Also, for some of you advanced tullab al-'ilm listening to this lecture, you also know very well that in the books of fiqh we read how different laws of qisas could be effectuated with a major component being considered the status and other demographic features of the victim.

Also, one should bear in mind that believing that human lives are not equal doesn't necessitate that we mandate laws that treat human beings differently in those areas. Sometimes the moral worth of different human beings may be interlinked with their inner state that is not visible and apparent to us. Thus, to issue laws primarily based on factors invisible to us is not something so straightforward and advisable. But again, I don't wish to get into all that, as it's not relevant to the success of The Status Principle argument. But just some food for thought.

Another objection that is raised against The Status Principle is that God is not infinite in a quantitative mathematical sense. You can't quantify God mathematically, and if that's the case, why are you Muslims going about quantifying the punishment of hell so that it lasts for an endless number of sequential years into the never-ending future?

But again, no one said that Allah سبحانه وتعالى is being quantified. Those who say He's infinite simply mean that He's infinite in a qualitative sense. Infinitude in the *quantitative* sense is in reference to notions such as limitlessness, unboundedness, immeasurability, etc. However, infinitude in a *qualitative* sense entails absoluteness, wholeness, completeness, independence, perfection, etc. So when we say that God's attributes are infinite, we mean that they are wholesome and complete in their utmost and maximal perfection. الكمال المطلق. Not that God's attributes are being quantified sequentially and endlessly, but rather that God's perfection is ultimate in that there can be no being that is conceivably greater in terms of its properties.

So when we say that Allah is infinitely great, merciful, majestic, powerful, etc. We simply mean that no being can ever conceivably be greater than Allah in terms of these attributes. When we say that Allah is infinite in His power, we mean that He can do anything logically possible. When we say that He's infinite in His goodness, we mean that He is completely good, and there's no shred of an evil trait in Him, etc.

So, since Allah سبحانه وتعالى is maximally holy, majestic, dignified, honorable, supreme, great, (العلي، الكبير،)، (العظيم، الجليل، المجيد، الحميد)، that would entail that His status as a moral being is infinite in a *qualitative* sense, which renders the ultimate crime of Shirk committed against Him to be maximal as well. And that *qualitative* maximal punishment may *very well be a quantitative* endless sequence of epochs of suffering

in hell, as it so happens to be most befitting in an infinite *qualitative* sense. Again, we aren't arguing that God is infinite in a *quantitative* sense, but rather that the fitting maximal and infinite *qualitative* punishment in this specific regard just so happens to be *quantifiable* in the form of an endless sequence of time in hell into the future.

Another objection states that punishments should only take into account the amount of harm caused to the victim or offended party. And since God cannot be harmed, direct offenses against Him shouldn't be punished, let alone endlessly.

The problem with that reasoning is that it's not true. Let's say you find out that somebody tried to kill you, and you weren't even aware that he was trying to. His plans to kill you got disrupted by the police, and they arrested him before he was even able to get close to you. You weren't harmed one bit, neither emotionally, nor physically. Does that mean that the person who tried to kill you doesn't deserve to be punished? I mean, actually deserves to be punished for his attempt to kill you? Not that he should be locked up merely so that you stay safe, but rather that he deserves to be punished for the intention and the actions he took in his attempt to kill you, despite you not being harmed at all in the entire process? Yes, of course, he deserves to be punished. So to say that punishments should only factor into consideration the amount of harm actually done isn't correct.

Secondly, saying that Allah cannot be harmed does not mean that He cannot become angry when His rights are being violated in an attempt to undermine His Honor and Majesty. It doesn't mean that He does not punish those who negligently failed to appropriately exemplify their subservience to Him, even though He is in no need of it. God is a unique case in that one can commit an offense against Him, despite Him never being able to be harmed by that offense. Yet, the fact remains that the offense was committed, and that offense still needs to be accounted for and addressed in the name of justice and fairness.

Another objection that is raised is that it's presumptuous on our part to assume that God is infinitely greater than human beings. Some critics would object by demanding to know the rational proof for that. Well, before answering that, we could first ask ourselves what properties do humans have, which make them more morally worthy than animals and insects?

Well, there are a number of distinguishing properties that we could consider here. One, for example, is moral excellence. Human beings are moral agents who govern and abide by moral codes. They have the ability to moralize and uphold ethical values and principles. Animals, on the other hand, aren't moral agents at that sophisticated level.

Another property is cognitive or intellectual ability. We recognize that the ability to rationalize is an inherently worthy and valuable property to have.

Another property to consider is power. Not power in the sense of physical strength, because quite obviously, several animals such as lions and bears could easily overpower human beings individually. However, power here is more to do with effecting change in the world. And that ability is strongly interlinked with and supported by other properties that human beings have, such as knowledge, rationality, etc.

So looking at some of these properties, which we intuitively recognize to be intrinsically valuable, we could see why humankind as an ontological class of being is superior to animals.

Now, one may dispute that these specific properties *are* the properties that make us superior to animals. That's fine, but the fact remains that the vast majority of us do recognize that human beings are inherently superior to and more morally worthy in status than animals. And whatever positive properties human beings have that make them superior to animals, then know that God's positive properties are infinitely greater than human beings. God is infinitely greater than us in moral excellence, knowledge, power, etc.

Also, consider self-sufficiency or independence as a property. It's hardly deniable that this is a positive attribute to have. Well, Allah سبحانه وتعالى is infinitely self-sufficient. Not only does He not depend on anyone, but all living things depend upon Him for their continued existence and sustenance. Even if a potentially infinite number of things continued to pop into existence, God would remain the object of dependence for them. There is no limit to how much one could depend on Allah سبحانه وتعالى; and thus, there's this infinitely qualitative trait of dependability that we could also ascribe to Allah سبحانه وتعالى, as He's القيوم, الرزاق, المهيمن, and so on.

And as a result of Allah سبحانه وتعالى being infinitely greater in status than us due to these maximally perfect attributes, He likewise is infinite in terms of His holiness (He is القدوس), infinite in terms of His honor (He is المجيد) and is the source of all honor and dignity (He is المعز). And so when the ultimate crime of Shirk is committed against Allah سبحانه وتعالى, the seriousness of the offense must in some way reflect His infinite majestic status. The crime must be considered maximally serious, maximally grievous. The kind of guilt at play here is maximal in nature as well. And as the infinitely worthy God that He is, Allah سبحانه وتعالى would have regard for His own honor, especially when His sole right to be worshipped alone has been violated unjustifiably.

Therefore, the guilt and liability to punishment that is carried with this offense must be of infinite severity in order to proclaim and reaffirm the infinite worth and majesty of Allah سبحانه وتعالى. To commit such a treacherous crime against He who is infinitely dependable is tantamount to an act of infinite ungratefulness and treachery. And to make it known that such offenses against Allah are of a nature incomparable to offenses we are typically familiar with. And since the punishment must be maximal, one possible form of that maximal punishment is everlasting hell.

Now, I'm not going to go as far as saying that the punishment for unrepentant and inexcusable Shirk *must be* everlasting hell. I'm not going to make that claim. I don't need to overburden myself trying to prove that. Rather, it only suffices to demonstrate that it's logically sound and defensible for the punishment to be everlasting hell. I don't need to argue that everlasting hell is the *only* adequate punishment that Allah سبحانه وتعالى could have used to justly punish people for kufr. All I need to do is show that we could rationally defend everlasting hell as an adequate punishment for committing kufr. I don't need to go beyond that.

And I believe that the Status Principle is a logically sound and rationally valid argument demonstrating why at the very least, it's logically possible for God to mete out everlasting hell as a punishment for the

ultimate crime of Shirk committed against Him. And that's all that needs to be demonstrated in order to debunk the argument criticizing the notion of everlasting hell as a punishment for disbelief.

Another objection states that you cannot measure the worth of a being simply by looking at its properties. Is a human being who is mentally incapacitated and cannot use his cognitive faculties less worthy of a human being who isn't? Or how about a baby who still isn't rational? Is that baby less worthy than a rational and intellectual adult human being whose rational faculties are more developed?

Okay, so this is thinking about this the wrong way. Obviously, there are human beings who are more intelligent than others and more pious and morally upright than others, etc. But, that doesn't mean that we start measuring the inherent worth of human beings based on this. We only appealed to these properties in order to demonstrate that human beings as an ontological class or as a nature of being are superior as a class of species and are, in essence, superior to animals. And so, any member of that class by virtue of belonging to that ontological class becomes superior in nature by default to any member belonging to an inferior ontological class of being. So a one-day-old human infant is inherently more worthy than a dog who lived for fifteen years with cherished memories with his loving human caretakers. Since human infants are the outcome of the sacred procreative process of human beings that are superior to animals, they by default also inherit and attain that moral worth.

Now, look, there's nothing stopping anybody from coming along and saying: you know what, I disagree. I don't think human beings are superior to animals. You can't appeal to biological features such as the intellect of a certain species and say that this makes them inherently superior to another species. You have no definitive rational proof that human babies are more worthy than cats and dogs who lived with their loving owners for more than a decade, etc. And you know what, on purely rational grounds alone, it's not that easy to dominate such people intellectually. It's for this very reason that Allah سبحانه وتعالى has sent down revelation. We can't definitively know *everything* that's right and wrong simply based on our rationality alone.

Again, I'll repeat myself; the only thing I've been trying to demonstrate here is that everlasting hell as a punishment could be rationally defended. That there is no definitive rational argument against it. And as long as the Muslim has good reasons for believing that Islam is true, any speculative argument against the notion of everlasting hell should not prompt Muslims to have doubts about Islam.

## **How Can God Be All-Loving and All-Merciful, Yet Send People to Hell?**

Let's move on to a new objection that appeals to God's attributes of love and mercy, which goes something like this: If God is All-Loving and All-Merciful, does that not entail that He loves everybody and is merciful to everybody? And if so, how can we reconcile that with God sending those whom He loves and is merciful to, to Hell?

And some people who raise these objections say things like "I wouldn't even wish eternal hell on my worst enemy, but how can *I* be more merciful than God?" or "If I knew that somebody was going to walk

into a burning building, I'd use my power to stop them because that's the loving and merciful thing to do. Yet you, the Muslim, believes that God doesn't do that, despite Him being infinitely perfect in His attributes. That makes no sense."

Okay, so, in addressing this objection, let's first talk about the attribute of love. Islam does not teach that Allah loves everybody unconditionally. On the contrary, Allah's love is very much conditional. Allah's love is too precious to be directed to anybody unconditionally. What Allah سبحانه وتعالى does is *offer* His love to everybody in the form of Islam by having sent the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as a mercy to the worlds. And only those who accept and love the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) would count as those who have accepted Allah's offer of love and will then, in turn, be loved by Allah Himself.

Allah commands the Prophet (peace be upon him) to say to the people:

قُلْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُحِبُّونَ اللَّهَ فَاتَّبِعُونِي يُحْبِبْكُمُ اللَّهُ

Say: if you love Allah, then follow me, so that Allah may love you.<sup>22</sup>

Allah loves *and* hates, and hell is one of the manifestations of Allah's hatred, just as paradise is one of the manifestations of Allah's love. Paradise and hell are outcomes of our relationship to Allah سبحانه وتعالى.

This is what Islam teaches. Now, those of you who are familiar with Muslim and Christian debates may be aware that several Christian apologists try to criticize Islam for teaching that God doesn't love everybody unconditionally, including disbelievers whom He sends off to hell. And Muslim apologists have already pretty much responded to this argument, so I'm not going to go off on a tangent here by responding to that argument. Those of you who are interested can go and search for those responses. However, for the purpose of this talk, I'm just going to simply say that Muslims do not share the burden that Christians have in trying to reconcile between how God can love somebody and simultaneously send that somebody to hell for eternity. Muslims, from the get-go, dismiss the presupposition that God loves everybody unconditionally.

Now, regarding Allah سبحانه وتعالى being All-Merciful. Again, does that mean that Allah سبحانه وتعالى will be unconditionally and completely merciful to everybody? Surely that's not the case; otherwise, how can we affirm that Allah is also the All-Just who can punish people for their sins? We can't isolate Allah's attributes at the expense of others.

As was stated earlier, Allah سبحانه وتعالى will not place anybody in hell unless they had a fair opportunity to make decisions that would have placed them on the right course toward the path of guidance. Allah doesn't owe us salvation.

وَلَوْلَا فَضْلُ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ وَرَحْمَتُهُ مَا زَكَا مِنْكُمْ مِنْ أَحَدٍ أَبَدًا وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ يُزَكِّي مَنْ يَشَاءُ

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<sup>22</sup> 3:31



And had it not been for Allah's grace and mercy upon you, He wouldn't have purified anyone of you. But Allah purifies whom He wills.<sup>23</sup>

If you say that Allah *must* take people out of hell at some point, then now, we aren't speaking about Allah's mercy and grace anymore, but rather His justice. Because you're now claiming that it's the kafir's *right* to not be in hell forever.

Mercy is the remission or forgiveness of a penalty that is already fair to apply. Otherwise, if you want to insist that Allah *cannot* punish people with everlasting hell, then that means that you're appealing to His attribute of justice, not mercy. And we've already tackled earlier how the punishment of everlasting hell could, in fact, be just.

To say that justice demands that Allah place us in paradise would be to transform what *ought* to be His mercy into duty for Allah. However, Allah does not *owe* us paradise for our works. Yes, our works are a reason for us entering paradise, but we haven't *earned* paradise as a result of our works, as if it's some wage owed to us. We enter paradise primarily on the basis of Allah's Mercy. The very idea of mercy itself entails that Allah سبحانه وتعالى has the prerogative of either granting it or not, whilst not compromising any of His attributes.

Just to elaborate on this point further, imagine there are ten beggars on the street. You do not have a personal obligation to help any of them, but out of kindness and generosity, you decided to help three out of the ten beggars. Can the other seven beggars who you did not choose to help say that you were unfair for not helping them? No, they cannot. Why not? Because you had no obligation to help any of them. The fact that you chose to help some of them was due to your own willingness to be generous and kind to some of them. It's not like you're an employer who only decided to pay *some* of his employees their due wages. Rather, these beggars had no rights over you in specific as an individual.

Similarly, if Allah سبحانه وتعالى does decide to extend His grace and mercy to some people, rather than others, this is not unjust on His part as people do not have *rights* over Allah سبحانه وتعالى. This is especially the case when Allah Himself has assured us that He doesn't let anyone carry a burden too heavy for them to bear.

Moreover, we need to understand that Allah's attributes of mercy and wrath are appropriately relational to that, which is fitting to these attributes. It depends on what Allah has created. A rebellious Satan is not deserving of Allah's mercy. It's not fitting that he receives Allah's mercy. People who explicitly and unrepentantly blaspheme God are not worthy of Allah's mercy.

To understand "All-Merciful" as an attribute entailing that Allah is completely merciful to everybody unconditionally is problematic. For Allah to never unleash His wrath on unrepentant criminals could, in fact, be said to *not* be loving and merciful to the victims who do not obtain justice in this life. So this idea of Allah being unconditionally and completely merciful to everybody is absurd.

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<sup>23</sup> 24:21

And regarding this claim that “Umm, I wouldn’t wish hell on someone, therefore, how can I be more merciful than God?” Okay, first of all, there are many things that you wouldn’t wish on somebody, but you know for a fact that God permits it. Take evil in the world, for example. You know that God has the power to stop evil, and despite being All-Merciful, He chooses not to. And we as human beings wouldn’t wish evil to happen to others whom Allah allows evil to occur to. Mercy as a human emotion could sometimes be a defect, as it could taint our ability to be objectively good judges. But not with Allah سبحانه وتعالى, so let’s not compare ourselves to Him.

## Regarding the Hadith Qudsi “My Mercy Overcomes My Wrath”

Consider the famous hadith Qudsi where Allah سبحانه وتعالى states:

إِنَّ رَحْمَتِي سَبَقَتْ غَضَبِي

Or

إِنَّ رَحْمَتِي غَلَبَتْ غَضَبِي

My Mercy precedes my Wrath, or my Mercy overcomes my Wrath.

Some Muslims have mistakenly used this hadith to suggest that Allah سبحانه وتعالى would not punish anyone in hell forever, since it appears to them that Allah in this hadith Qudsi is claiming that ultimately, His Mercy would overcome His Wrath in the sense that a time will come where there will be no more punishment.

However, this is a faulty understanding of the hadith, and several ulama have offered reasonable plausible interpretations of this hadith.

We need to understand that there are different dimensions to mercy. There is a generic dimension that is applicable to both believers and non-believers. And there’s also the special kind of mercy, namely salvific guidance to attaining paradise, and that is only specific to believers.

When it comes to generic mercy, for example, Allah سبحانه وتعالى says in the Qur’an that He sent the Prophet (peace be upon him) as a mercy to the worlds,

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ إِلَّا رَحْمَةً لِّلْعَالَمِينَ<sup>24</sup>

And the Prophet (peace be upon him) was sent to everybody.

Rain is described as a form of mercy in the Qur’an,

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<sup>24</sup> 21:107

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ يُرْسِلَ الرِّيَّاحَ مُبَشِّرَاتٍ وَلِيَذِيقَكُمْ مِنْ رَحْمَتِهِ

And,

فَنَظَرُ إِلَى آثَرِ رَحْمَتِ اللَّهِ كَيْفَ يُحْيِي الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا<sup>26</sup>

And rain comes down and benefits both believers and disbelievers.

There's also a hadith in Saheeh Muslim where the Prophet (peace be upon him) said something to the effect that Allah سبحانه وتعالى has 100 levels of Mercy and He only sent down one of them to earth so that human beings, the jinn, animals, and insects can be kind and merciful to one another.

So again, no distinction between believers and non-believers here.

But, going back to the hadith Qudsi, what does it mean that Allah's Mercy overcomes or precedes His wrath?

First, notice the context of the statement. The hadith states:

Abu Huraira reported God's messenger as saying, "When God completed the creation He wrote the following which is with Him above His Throne, 'My mercy has taken precedence over my anger.'" Another version says, "Has prevailed over my anger."

So this statement was uttered after Allah completed the process of creation. It's not that He will say this in the afterlife on Judgment Day. So, it's worthy to note the context.

With this in mind, one understanding of Allah's statement is that Allah's Mercy is much more vast than His punishment. His mercy is always constantly being bestowed upon us, while His wrath is selective in terms of timing and in terms of whom He is unleashing His wrath against. His Mercy has come to us without any preconditions and has literally preceded (سبق) His wrath, which is only unleashed *later* against us if we continuously sin and fail to repent.

Another interpretation to consider is that the root word of "overcome" in the hadith, غلبة is meant to emphasize abundance, in that His Mercy is so much more manifested than His wrath. In Arabic, we could say غلب على فلان الشجاعة, meaning, the individual's bravery was more manifested. In other words, his attribute of bravery dominated. Similarly, Allah's Mercy is more manifested and exemplified than His Wrath.

Another understanding is that Allah's Mercy precedes His Wrath because He began bestowing it upon us immediately once we were brought into existence.

Another way to understand this statement is that Allah's wrath upon most of the kuffar for their kufr happens in the afterlife. Their kufr does not prevent Allah's generic mercy from being bestowed upon

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<sup>25</sup> 30:46

<sup>26</sup> 30:50

them in this life despite their kufr. And in that sense, Allah's mercy literally precedes His ultimate wrath for them.

Thus, as we can see, there's absolutely no reason why this hadith Qudsi would even serve as good proof for saying that hell cannot be everlasting, especially when all these plausible alternative interpretations have not been shown to be less plausibly correct.

## Addressing the Geographic Distribution Problem

The next objection concerns what is known in the literature as the demographics of theism objection. So basically, it goes something like this: "If you were born in Saudi Arabia, you are more likely to be a Muslim than if you were born in a religious Hindu family in India, or religious Christian family in the United States, and so on."

Undoubtedly, our upbringing has an influence on us, as we do tend to share the values and beliefs of our parents. And clearly, we did not choose the circumstances of our births. And being born into the right religion appears to give such people a big advantage over others born into false religions. Those born into false religions appear to have many more barriers to overcome in order to attain salvation. And, so the objection goes: that's not fair. God, as those raising the objection would contend, should give everybody an equal opportunity at salvation.

A number of comments are in order.

So, first of all, God does not owe human beings equal levels of opportunity. There's nothing about His attributes that necessitates that. We need to stop subjecting God to our human moral standards. Yes, we human beings typically give people equal chances of opportunity at a number of things, even though there appear to be many exceptions, but I don't wish to digress. Let's assume that human beings always give other human beings equal chances at things. As for God, all that matters is that He is just. And that justice is manifested by His promise that He will not bear people burdens that they cannot carry. It is His prerogative to give harder tests to people as He pleases. He *is* God, after all. The main thing to believe, however, is that He won't punish people for tests they had no chance of passing.

Moreover, how do we really know that believers and nonbelievers aren't *ultimately* treated equally? If you recall, we said earlier that Allah سبحانه وتعالى could and does intervene to help people become guided or remain on the path of guidance, as long as the higher-order desire to truly want to acquire religious truth is there. Well, perhaps Allah's *level* of intervention to assist a *truly* sincere nonbeliever in a non-Muslim land is greater in its extent than the divine intervention that He makes to keep a Muslim in a Muslim land steadfast upon the deen. In other words, Allah's level of divine intervention to guide people offsets the perceived apparent imbalance between people living in different circumstances, and it also compensates for whatever extra barriers one may have to overcome. In other words, Allah سبحانه وتعالى will give the optimal amount of guidance to each person in accordance with the level of difficulty of their

circumstances, as long as they have the correct higher-order desire to truly seek religious truth. So, all in all, things may very well equally balance out.

Secondly, keeping aside the fact that there are converts to Islam and apostates *from* Islam, and how this observable fact serves as proof that it's possible to overcome demographic barriers, it's widely common to see people rebelling against their parents. Rebelling against the traditions of their family. Wanting to be different and shifting away from their parents' "old boring traditional norms" and seeking to be "modern and open-minded." It's enough seeing the shifting trends in religious thought in countries that were predominantly Christian just a century ago and are now becoming more anti-religious. Look at the rise in acceptance of LGBT and other radical shifts in sexual ethics, for instance. There've been so many wide-ranging and significant ideological and cultural shifts just in these two past generations alone.

So what we need to acknowledge here is that most people clearly have it in them to go against what their parents taught them. They have it in them to look back at their upbringing and say, "I disagree with that. I want to be different." And that happens a lot, especially as people get older and get exposed to different perspectives. Yet, the problem is that most people, unfortunately, make awfully wrong decisions. So, this whole idea of people supposedly being born into embracing certain beliefs and customs, and are psychologically unable to reject them, is an argument that can only go so far.

There's no denying that being born into a non-Muslim family is a barrier. And that being born into a practicing Muslim family is a gift and blessing from Allah سبحانه وتعالى. But the question is: is that barrier overcomable? That's the main question.

But someone may insist that if that same disbeliever were to have been born into a Muslim family, then he would have died a Muslim. But, so what? As we said, Allah does not owe anybody anything, similar to the beggars analogy that we gave earlier. The only thing that suffices to say at this point is that as long as Allah is not demanding something unbearable from an individual and punishing him on account of it, then the argument fumbles.

And by the way, this is notwithstanding philosophical issues pertaining to identity here. Many would argue that I, Bassam Zawadi, am only Bassam Zawadi because I was born into a particular family in a particular time and place, and I am who I am because of all the experiences that I went through, which shaped my personality, etc. Thus, if my soul were to have been placed in a different body born under completely different circumstances, then I wouldn't necessarily be Bassam Zawadi anymore. I'd have a different name, different attitude, different life experiences, etc. So to even talk about us being the 'same people' being born in different contexts has its own philosophical issues, but I'm not going to dwell on that.

So, how far do we want to go with this? Shall we start excusing racists because they were born into racist families? Shall we start excusing Nazis because if you or I were born in Germany in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we might have ended up as Nazis as well?

Or how about we look at other demographic variables, such as social class. Shall we now start making excuses for people who were born into rich materialistic families and had more dunya temptations to

overcome, and as a result, became heedless and forgetful of God and the afterlife due to the many distractions? Shall we say: oh poor rich people. They didn't choose to be born rich and get distracted by all those temptations? Where and when do the excuses end?

Or, do we do something more reasonable and tell ourselves: “Hmm, okay. Clearly, these people born into challenging circumstances have been brainwashed or tempted. We need to inform them that they are wrong. We need to show them proof that they are wrong for holding the views that they hold. We can understand and appreciate that if nobody tried to convey to them that they are wrong, that they may continue to hold the views that they do because that's what they were taught to believe. However, for them to continue holding on to their views even after being conveyed that they shouldn't subjects them to just and fair rebuke.”

I'd contend that this is the attitude that we have for people believing any other negative thing, so why hold a different standard when it comes to false religions then?

Moreover, suppose geography is truly a barrier to someone with the sincere higher-order desire to seek and accept religious truth. In that case, such a person is expected to exert effort in migrating away from that land.

أَلَمْ تَكُنْ أَرْضُ اللَّهِ وَاسِعَةً فَتُهَاجِرُوا فِيهَا

Wasn't Allah's earth vast enough so that you can migrate therein?<sup>27</sup>

Also, we can't forget the role of Satan in all this. Despite being resistible, Satan is one of the causal factors influencing people to make wrong choices. Many of us tend to forget the supernatural forces at play here and only focus on searching for secular explanations for why people make the moral and spiritual decisions that they do, such as one's geographical location of his birth.

I strongly believe that at this point that any further objections related to this argument would only arise out of a personal dislike for how God created the world with its division and distribution of believers and disbelievers, as opposed to there being a clear definitive argument for why God with the attributes that He has could or would not have created the world in this manner.

### Addressing the “Sincerity Objection”

According to the Qur'an, people are kuffar for different reasons. Some choose kufr out of love for sticking to their own traditions, some out of following their desires, arrogance, fear of losing dunya privileges, inexcusable ignorance, envy, distraction by materialistic pleasures, apathy, or lack of caring to know the truth, etc.

But once again, some people raise objections.

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<sup>27</sup> 4:97

What about sincere truth-seeking people who do not convert to Islam? People who sincerely saw no reason even to consider Islam as a serious option. Or, they died after trying to research Islam with an open mind and heart, yet failed to be pressed into converting to it.

And the objection would go on to say: isn't *how* we believe more important than *what* we believe? Isn't the kafir who has taken religious truth more seriously by researching and contemplating about the different religious options out there better than a believing Muslim who's quite careless about these issues and is only Muslim because he was privileged enough to be born into a Muslim family?

Didn't these kuffar have the correct higher-order desires to be guided yet weren't guided? Why weren't these kuffar shown more evidence to overwhelm them into accepting Islam? Isn't there room to tolerate valid differences of opinion concerning religious truth? Aren't Muslims over cocky when it comes to how clear the evidence for Islam is in an age where are no more miracles being performed by prophets? Not everyone is capable of having access to the best Islamic scholarship, which addresses arguments against Islam and offers proof on behalf of it. So, why should non-Muslims who are good people suffer the consequences of all that?

And going further with the objection, how about people who have misunderstood Islam, and as a result of that misunderstanding, have rejected Islam? Can we even say that they *truly* rejected Islam as opposed to a mere caricature of it?

Okay, so let's address these inshallah.

Okay, first of all, it's important to reiterate what has already been said, namely, that Islam teaches that Allah سبحانه وتعالى will not make anybody carry a burden that they cannot bear. It is true that Muslims theologians do differ with one another whether it's morally possible for Allah to make somebody carry a burden that they cannot bear; however, they all agree, regardless of whether it's possible or not, that Allah *does not* and *will not* make anybody endure a burden that they cannot bear.

Secondly, and as mentioned before, we are in no position to comment on the sincerity of anybody. Allah سبحانه وتعالى says in the Qur'an that He knows best who is worthy of His guidance. Just because you see somebody who outwardly appears to be researching tirelessly for religious truth, that doesn't mean that this is what is truly going on. It could very well be the case that the person's motive is to "sincerely" find the best arguments for his currently held beliefs and to find holes in others because he's already made up his mind that he's right; not out of true, sincere openness to seeking the truth.

Thirdly, as for who is truly a "good person" according to the standards of God and not our own personal standards, that is also something very difficult to pass judgment on. Let me share a true personal anecdote. I, Bassam, work in the corporate world, ok. And I had a non-Muslim manager who, for all intents and purposes, was a seemingly nice guy. One time, during Ramadan, my manager told me: "Bassam, I'm starving. I haven't eaten all day." And then I jokingly said to him: "Wow, you might as well just fast like the rest of us Muslims, seeing it's the afternoon, and you haven't eaten yet." I was just joking with him. And then I went to the restroom. And suddenly, he came barging in while I was washing my hands, and he said to me with a visibly upset face and a slightly harsh tone: "You know what, Bassam? I don't have a problem with the idea of fasting. What I have a problem with is being *told* by somebody to fast. I don't like to be told to do such things." And, you know, I was really gobsmacked to see him say that. We never

spoke about these issues at work. I knew he was an atheist, but the way he said what he said, in addition to what he said, was just so eye-opening for me. That here I thought was a humble, hard-working man, but turned out to be somebody who found it beneath him to fast for an infinitely perfect God even if he didn't believe that God existed. Three weeks later, he passed away. He had a stroke. And if that incident didn't occur, I probably would have been like: "Ahh, poor guy, he was such a good guy. He was hardworking and committed to his job. He was good to his colleagues. He was very humble. Shame, shame, he didn't accept Islam." But this incident, which was totally unprompted, made me view him differently.

And you see, the thing is this, most of us don't really get to see people for who they *really* are when it comes to these issues, especially in this day and age where even talking about religion and politics is highly discouraged in several contexts and environments. And that ought to make us reflect. We ought to humble ourselves and admit that we don't *really* know who is *truly* sincere and who isn't. Let's trust in Allah and stop with the speculative assumptions.

Fourthly, regarding misunderstanding Islam. What do we mean exactly by misunderstanding Islam? No one has a flawless understanding of everything about Islam. Even Muslims can be mistaken about their understanding of certain issues about Islam. What concerns us is how important is the matter that has been misunderstood. If someone misunderstood something about Islam and that misunderstanding legitimizes and justifies his rejection of Islam as a result, then yes, a case could be made that he *possibly* deserves an excuse. However, if someone understands the core elements of Islam yet, misunderstands something about Islam, such as something pertaining to a moral issue, for example, an issue where it cannot be rationally demonstrated to be impossible for God to have issued that moral mandate, then rejecting Islam on this basis alone may not be justified.

In fact, the bulk of the excuses that we hear today from people concerning their rejection of Islam stem from issues pertaining to morality whereby if they perceive (correctly or otherwise) Islam to be teaching something that doesn't align with their already presupposed moral standards, then Islam is worthy of rejection. They do so even if it cannot be demonstrated with definitive rational proofs that God *couldn't* have legislated the mandates that they rejected Islam on account of. So, if the misunderstanding of the kafir is linked to an issue that does *not* legitimize rejecting Islam for, then the excuse for misunderstanding Islam does *not* necessarily apply. So we need to be clear about this point.

So, if someone, for example, understands Islamic core teachings properly, yet he has a misunderstanding that Islam supposedly teaches that the husband has the right to take his wife's money forcibly, and he rejects Islam simply based on that; this is not a legitimate reason. Even though Islam doesn't teach that husbands have the right to take their wives' money forcibly, there is nothing that rationally indicates that it's impossible for Allah to have legislated that if He so willed. Thus, even though this is a misunderstanding about some aspect of Islam, rejecting Islam for this reason is not justified. Therefore, we need to be careful in highlighting what are legitimate excuses and not.

And again, let's be forthright here. We see most people out there rejecting Islam for several of its moral teachings that they clearly do understand, but because it doesn't align with their own moral standards, standards which they cannot even prove to be true, that they reject it. And even when Muslims do offer clarifications about several of these moral issues, many of these clarifications involve secondary aspects regarding the issue, not primary. So, for example, even if you clarify that the hudud are only implemented



after strict preconditions were met, the fact remains that the hudud are still open to being applied once the conditions have been fulfilled, and several people still reject Islam as supposedly being barbaric on account of it.

I'm speaking from over fifteen years of experience as an apologist here, and believe me when I say that unless the critic of Islam has an open mind about recognizing the fact that you can't definitively prove that God couldn't legislate these mandates, you the Muslim are not going to succeed in convincing him to rationally and happily embrace *all* the moral legislations of Islam. And it's the critic's resistance to accepting that fact and insistence on subjecting moral codes to his own personal unprovable moral standards that makes the critic's rejection of Islam unjustified.

Fifthly, and related to the previous point, we also need to consider people's excuses for misunderstanding Islam's core teachings. Some Muslims say things like, "well, you know, when you have anti-Islamic propaganda outlets like Fox News spreading all this misinformation about Islam, can you really blame non-Muslims for having such a negative perception?"

Okay, once again, we need to be a bit more nuanced here. Propaganda and the false spreading of rumors about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) are as old as the inception of Islam itself. There were false rumors concerning the Prophet (عليه الصلاة والسلام) during his lifetime of him being a magician, fortuneteller, poet, etc. Yet, those people exposed to that propaganda also had access to sources containing the truth. It's not like they were living far off in distant lands away from any reasonable access to alternative sources of information, the kind of kuffar that Imam Al-Ghazali speaks about in his book *Faysal al-Tafriqa* who could have legitimate excuses. Rather, some people have decided to restrict themselves to particular avenues of information and rejected the other avenues, much of the time, without a sound and valid basis.

So going back to the whole Fox News excuse, don't these people have the ability to reach out to Muslims and speak to them by visiting a masjid, for example? Can't they read the Qur'an, or perhaps go on the internet and speak to Muslims? How about googling how Muslims respond to these allegations? Do they not know that different media outlets can say different things? Sure, they do. They are the very same people who complain about other news outlets and how they propagandize against their faith. So, on what basis did they decide that Fox News is speaking the infallible truth about Islam? Who forcibly shoved Fox News propaganda down their throats? Should they really be left off the hook and not answer for why they willingly decided to restrict themselves to a particular source of information about Islam? We wouldn't excuse them if we were talking about other things such as racism and Zionism, yet when it comes to false religions, some of us appear to be lax when it comes to the excuses we're willing to afford others, and that's problematic.

Allah says in the Qur'an that in the afterlife, many of those destined to hell rebuke those who "brainwashed" them. Kind of like those people "brainwashed" by Fox News. And the response of those people, like those working at Fox News, is that they never had any power over them, وَمَا كَانَ لَنَا عَلَيْكُمْ مِّنْ سُلْطَانٍ<sup>28</sup> And then Allah سبحانه وتعالى states that both of them will be punished, the brainwasher and the brainwashed, فَاتَّخَذُوا يَوْمَئِذٍ فِي الْعَذَابِ مُشْتَرِكُونَ<sup>29</sup> In other words, you're not little children who can't think for

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<sup>28</sup> 37:30

<sup>29</sup> 37:33

themselves. You should be held accountable for what information you willingly decide to swallow and accept.

And sixthly, regarding this whole issue of “more evidence.” Why doesn’t Allah سبحانه وتعالى make the evidence for Islam so convincing that everyone would be compelled to concede that Islam is true to the point that whoever denies it would be equated to a flat-earther who deserves to be ridiculed by everybody?

We need to understand that Iman is much more than mere belief or cognizance of certain facts about Islam. Even Iblis knows that Islam is the true religion revealed by Allah. Rather, Iman also entails *embracing* Islam. And we don’t always embrace what we know to be true. One, for example, may know and believe that a certain law must be followed in the country he lives in; yet, he doesn’t embrace or wholeheartedly accept that law. Iman, however, requires embracing Islam, not merely knowing that it’s true. Allah سبحانه وتعالى states:

فَلَا وَرَبِّكَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ حَتَّىٰ يُحَكِّمُوكَ فِيمَا شَجَرَ بَيْنَهُمْ ثُمَّ لَا يَجِدُوا فِي أَنفُسِهِمْ حَرَجًا مِّمَّا قَضَيْتَ وَيُسَلِّمُوا تَسْلِيمًا

By Allah, they will never truly believe until they refer to you for judgment in their disputes. And they find no internal resistance regarding your judgment and completely submit to it.<sup>30</sup>

We know from reading the stories of the Prophets in the Qur’an that many kuffar continued to persist in their kufr despite being exposed to miracles and clear-cut proofs. Allah mentions in the Qur’an that the disciples of ‘Isa ‘alayhi assalam asked for a table to be sent down from heaven so that it can serve as an undeniable proof that ‘Isa ‘alayhi assalam was truly a messenger of Allah. And Allah سبحانه وتعالى obliged, and He sent down the table, but with an extremely important condition attached. He said:

فَمَن يَكْفُرْ بَعْدُ مِنكُم فإِنِّي أُعَذِّبُهُ عَذَابًا لَا أُعَذِّبُهُ أَحَدًا مِّنَ الْعَالَمِينَ

Whoever disbelieves after this, I will punish him with a punishment I will not punish anybody.<sup>31</sup>

That makes perfect sense. I mean, to be exposed to *that* level of evidence and *still* choose kufr just makes the kufr even more ugly and crude.

And so it could very well be in the best interests of mankind that the level of evidence for Islam isn’t compelling to *that* extent, for if mankind were to still be rebellious to God after that kind of evidence, then the punishment would just be worse.

We need to understand that kufr takes different forms. Kufr is not only about having incorrect beliefs but also involves having the wrong kind of response to Allah.

There is the kufr of apatheism (كفر الإعراض) whereby people don’t even care, true or not, whether Islam is the divine revelation of Allah, never even cared to research about any divine truth claims.

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<sup>30</sup> 4:65

<sup>31</sup> 5:115

There is kufr of rejection (كفر الجحود) whereby people would reject Islam regardless of whether it's true or not.

فَإِنَّهُمْ لَا يُكَذِّبُونَكَ وَلَكِنَّ الظَّالِمِينَ بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ يَجْحَدُونَ

They don't claim you are a liar, but rather the oppressors reject Allah's signs.<sup>32</sup>

There's arrogance-driven kufr (كفر الاستكبار), similar to Iblis. And it's not unique to Iblis; you even see it amongst people. For example, the popular and influential philosopher John Stuart Mill said:

"I am informed that the world is ruled by a being whose attributes are infinite, but what they are we cannot learn, except that the highest human morality does not sanction them—convince me of this and I will hear my fate as I may. But when I am told that I must believe this, and at the same time call this being by the names which express and affirm the highest human morality, I say, in plain terms, that I will not. Whatever power such a being may have over me, there is one thing he shall not do; he shall not compel me to worship him. I will call no being good who is not what I mean when I apply that epithet to my fellow creatures; **and if such a being can sentence me to hell for not so calling him, to hell I will go.**"

People who speak and challenge God like that, even out of sincerity, are not worthy of guidance, as it's very clear that their acceptance of God is conditioned upon God satisfying their own personal standards. In other words, they ultimately worship themselves.

Allah سبحانه وتعالى even tells us that there are some kuffar, not necessarily all, but some, who even after going through the experience of the Day of the Judgment and seeing hell, would express their wish to go back for a second chance, yet Allah سبحانه وتعالى says that even if they did, they would still go back to their old ways. <sup>33</sup>وَلَوْ رُدُّوا لَعَادُوا لِمَا نُهُوا عَنْهُ وَإِنَّهُمْ لَكَاذِبُونَ

Some expectedly struggle with this. How is this even possible? How could someone go back to kufr after experiencing the Day of Judgment and seeing hell? It's because these kinds of kuffar committed kufr out of arrogance. They didn't care about the truth. At that moment, as they witnessed hell, they only verbally claimed that they would change their ways if they had a second chance. It wasn't uttered out of sincerity or because they genuinely changed, but rather only as a pragmatic attempt to evade immediate punishment. Similar to Pharaoh, who said "I believe" while he was drowning. He didn't genuinely embrace Iman; he just wanted to be saved at that point. And for these kinds of people, once you take them back to their comfort zone, they forget whatever promises they made, and they go back to their old ways as their desires begin to revive, and they begin to have false impressions that judgment day is too far away to be concerned about it, even if they know it really exists.

وَلَيْسَتِ التَّوْبَةُ لِلَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ السَّيِّئَاتِ حَتَّى إِذَا حَضَرَ أَحَدَهُمُ الْمَوْتُ قَالَ إِنِّي تُبْتُ الْآنَ

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<sup>32</sup> 6:33

<sup>33</sup> 6:28

And repentance is not granted to those who commit sins to the point when death approaches; they say, “I’ve repented now.”<sup>34</sup>

No, that’s not genuine Iman that is based on acceptance, embrace, and sacrifice out of love for the truth that God has revealed. Rather, that’s a superficial kind of repentance with the sole objective of getting out of that immediate predicament. Such superficial repentance was directly linked to the distress that the person was feeling at the time. And so, if the distress is gone, then the desire to repent is gone as well. But if the repentance were genuine, then it would be different.

So this whole idea of having this “in your face evidence” for Islam in this world is not going to achieve what we think it would. The way Allah سبحانه وتعالى has so arranged this world, and the manner in which He manifests Himself to this world, is that His guidance is proportional to and reflective of the disposition of people’s hearts in terms of their intention to desire full truthful submission to God. And Allah has promised that guidance for such people. He would intervene in a divine manner to enable the actualization of their being guided to Islam. So, at that point, we need to stop thinking *purely* in terms of naturalistic means of how people can get guided to Islam, as there are supernatural forces at play here.

Allah سبحانه وتعالى states:

وَلَوْ عَلِمَ اللَّهُ فِيهِمْ خَيْرًا لَأَسْمَعَهُمْ وَلَوْ أَسْمَعَهُمْ لَتَوَلَّوْا وَهُمْ مُعْرِضُونَ

And if Allah knew that there was any good in them, He would have had them hear. But if even if He did make them hear, they would have still turned away out of stubbornness.<sup>35</sup>

Several Qur’anic exegetes here state that “hearing” here refers to hearing the proofs of Islam and understanding the message of Islam better. So, Allah, due to His infinite knowledge, knows that even if these kuffar were further exposed to better evidence for Islam and were further exposed to teachings that better explained Islam, that they would still be stubborn and reject it. And thus, Allah withheld that exposure to them.

But again, this is Allah سبحانه وتعالى speaking. We as Muslims cannot withhold better evidence for Islam and better-articulated teachings of Islam, as we do not know how people would react, but Allah knows. This ayah is so important for the subject that we are discussing.

Interestingly enough, I’ve come across ulama who have said that the opposite is also true. They said that if someone were in the process of sincerely and truly and correctly seeking religious truth but died before he became a Muslim, that Allah would forgive them. With the understanding being that Allah knew that if they were to continue living, they would have continued on that path and eventually found Islam, as they were on the *correct trajectory* of religious inquiry, and being on the correct trajectory by necessity would lead eventually somewhere down the line to somebody accepting Islam. Allahu ‘Alam.

The level of evidence for Islam that Allah has permitted to be accessible in the world is not simply there to satisfy people’s intellectual curiosity. Islam prompts people to consider it as a serious option that they must consider. The clarity of its truth to an individual varies in accordance with their willingness to open

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<sup>34</sup> 4:18

<sup>35</sup> 8:23

their hearts to follow the truth at all costs. The evidence for Islam is only a means to be used as a cause by Allah to guide those whose hearts are truly seeking Him. It's coupled with Allah's supernatural intervention,

فَمَنْ يُرِدِ اللَّهُ أَنْ يَهْدِيَهُ يَشْرَحْ صَدْرَهُ لِلْإِسْلَامِ

Whoever Allah wishes to guide; He expands their breast for Islam.<sup>36</sup>

This is important to understand. If we ignore this point and only think in terms of naturalistic epistemic means, then we're going to continue facing intellectual difficulties with this subject. We need to question whatever flawed expectations of what constitutes "sufficient evidence" and ask ourselves whether that even aligns with the purpose God set out for His creation. Allah has given us the freedom to choose to believe correctly, and that freedom by necessity entails the possibility of making wrong decisions. The freedom to choose guidance also involves the real chance of being misguided.

Now, some people would argue that surely, not all kuffar are the same. Abu Talib is not like Abu Jahl. That's clear, and Islam acknowledges that. Some openly blaspheme God and would go as far as saying that they don't even care about Allah, while other kuffar are not like that at all. That's fine; we acknowledge that. Islam does teach that kuffar will be in different levels of hell, with the intensity and severity of the punishment ranging variously across those different levels. So even though the levels share something in common when it comes to *duration*, namely, being everlasting, they still aren't exactly the same when it comes to *severity*.

As an analogy, think of two criminals sentenced to life in prison. One criminal ends up in a minimum-security prison, while the other is locked up at a maximum-security prison, does hard labor, and is permanently in solitary confinement. Yes, both of these criminals got life in prison, but the severity of the punishment isn't the same. So, a similar kind of logic applies to hell.

Lastly, sincerity is but a single characteristic that a person could have, but when that characteristic is mixed with other features, then the final cumulative result may not be a positive thing. Many racists sincerely believe that their race is superior. Many Zionists sincerely believe in their cause. Similarly, many ultra-nationalists sincerely believe that they can advocate for a brutal foreign policy if it serves their own countries' interests, etc. So, when sincerity is tainted with such ugly views, we stop to see sincerity at that point as a positive attribute. Why? Well, because these people *ought* to know better. It is expected of them to be better than this. This kind of sincerity is an ugly and defective kind. If anything, it could be worse to be a sincere racist than a hesitant one who is unsure whether he should be a racist. Similarly, due to the ugliness of Shirk, sincerity is tainted when it's coupled with it.

Now, with all that said, yes, Islam does teach this notion of Ahlul Fatrah. And I've spoken in more detail about the Ahlul Fatrah in my other lecture, which I alluded to earlier, entitled "Deconstructing Religious Pluralism," and I won't be rehashing much of what was said there, as I explained the different viewpoints scholars have concerning the Ahlul Fatrah. The opinion that I take is that the Ahlul Fatrah are those who were truly seeking religious truth in this life and reasonably exhausted their physical and intellectual capacities while doing so, yet failed to become Muslims. And we have to bear in mind that the excuses for the Ahlul Fatrah, as stated by Ibnul Qayyim, could vary across time and place. Depending on time and

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<sup>36</sup> 6:125

place, the excuses afforded to the Ahlul Fatrah could and would vary. Moreover, the Ahlul Fatrah, according to the opinion that I take, would be given a special test on the Day of Judgment to determine their reception of the message of Islam. And how they fair in their test would determine their ultimate destinies.

Now, some may ask, why would Allah سبحانه وتعالى even create the Ahlul Fatrah? I would submit that one of the wisdoms behind that is to remind us Muslims not to have any excuses for avoiding giving da'wah. To remind Muslims that there really are people out there who are receptive to the message of Islam, and we shouldn't assume that all kuffar are hopelessly kuffar. In fact, the existence of the Ahlul Fatrah could be a liability on Muslims who may have to collectively answer for why they have failed to ensure the spreading of Islam in an effective manner to every single person on the face of this earth. So their very existence could serve as a test for Muslims and as a motivation for Muslims to give da'wah.

So, yes, Islam teaches this notion of Ahlul Fatrah, but what I wanted to caution against is overdoing it with the kinds of excuses we make for kuffar and, as a result, unjustifiably overextend the scope of who *truly* qualifies to be classified under the fold of the Ahlul Fatrah.

## Addressing the Objection That Nobody Chooses Hell

But now, there's another objection that's raised. How can somebody *really choose* hell? Nobody in their right mind would choose to go to hell. Who in their right mind would want to burn in hell forever? Clearly, the kuffar are sincere when they reject Islam, right?

Allah سبحانه وتعالى has given human beings the autonomy to make free decisions with wide-ranging serious consequences. He allows people to choose their ultimate fate and destiny. Our personhood and identity are shaped by who we are and the decisions we make, which ultimately shape and form our beliefs and character. If Allah سبحانه وتعالى were to coerce or manipulate us into making us love and embrace and seek Him, then there isn't much of a test anymore.

But despite that free will, some insist that people still don't freely choose hell. Yes, a drug addict, for example, may willingly choose to take a particular drug, yet, he didn't *really* choose and desire to become so addicted to it. Yes, a person may choose to eat lots of sugary sweets every day, but he didn't *really* choose and desire to become obese. So, even though people may willingly choose to do an action, that doesn't mean that they have chosen to accept its consequences. And thus, some allege that God is unjust for giving human beings the capacity to make such drastic decisions, which affect their ultimate destinies. They argue that human beings should not be given such a huge responsibility, as they are comparable to children who shouldn't be left to make critical decisions pertaining to their lives even in the name of "freedom of choice." They argue that even adult human beings cannot make effectively accurate choices pertaining to religious truth given how much misinformation there is out there and how susceptible they are to making mistakes. In other words, it's a *bad thing* that human beings have the freedom to doom themselves, and in light of that, it's alleged that God is unjust.

Okay, now first of all, clearly such an argument dismisses the response we have been providing so far, namely that Allah سبحانه وتعالى will divinely intervene and assist those with correct higher-order intentions. And that we shouldn't only view belief formation and retention processes through a purely naturalistic lens. But the critics still insist that it's inconceivable for people even to have such corrupt higher-order desires.

But is it really inconceivable? Is it really inconceivable to imagine people knowingly wanting to make wrong decisions? To consciously and deliberately opt for a decision that they know isn't good for them, whether in the short term or long term?

No, it's not inconceivable at all. How many people smoke, despite knowing it's bad for them, both physically and financially, and have no desire to quit? Have no desire to desire to quit?

Some people here may counter that this example only shows that people *unknowingly* commit irrational actions, for, in their own minds, they don't intend to. So the guy who keeps smoking, for example, does so because he believes that he has enough money to buy cigarettes and that the statistical probability that he would get lung cancer as a result of smoking isn't so high to be worried about. So even though his reasoning is defective, he still isn't knowingly and intentionally making a wrong decision.

I would submit that this isn't the case with everybody who smokes, but let's allow that response to slide for the sake of argument, and let's consider other examples.

How many people cheat on their spouses and want to continue cheating on their spouses, despite knowing that doing so is very wrong according to the moral code that they follow? Or, how many people know full well that they have to get that aching tooth checked by the dentist, but because they are scared of the drill, they don't? They know they are going to suffer down the line, but just to postpone going to the dentist, they are willing to make things worse in the long term, but they are okay with that because the consequences are delayed.

Or let's have some extreme examples, how many have murdered others knowing full well that they would likely get caught, but that short-term desire to kill dominated their rationality? Some statistics show that more than half of criminals go back to committing crimes even after they've served prison sentences. This criminal recidivism highlights how many of these criminals are willing to choose a life of crime despite the consequential risks associated with making that decision, such as getting caught again and serving more time.

The simplest and most basic example one could give is the phenomenon of sinful Muslims. All of us Muslims, alhamdulillah, *know* that Islam is true. *Know* that Islam teaches that there are certain sins to avoid. *Know* that there is a real chance of being punished in hell, even if temporarily, for sins that we knowingly commit. How do we psychologically explain that? How do you, as a Muslim, psychologically explain to yourself how it is the case that you are willing to risk Allah *possibly* not forgiving you for the sins you *knowingly* commit and possibly enduring hell temporarily on account of it? Is the sin you have committed worth gambling with that risk, knowing what you know of the descriptions of hell's torments

in the Islamic sources? The irrationality is baffling, yet, many Muslims periodically commit sins, despite knowing and believing what they know and believe.

Why? Well, there is this undeniable phenomenon of the weakness of the will. Where we sometimes fail to resist temptations and cave into our desires, despite knowing better. And sometimes, we make ourselves feel better about committing sins by willfully forgetting or suppressing information or even lying to ourselves. We say things like: “Oh, I will repent later.” Or “Oh, Allah is the Most-Merciful, He won’t punish me.” and we attempt to rationalize the irrational.

We can spend forever trying to debate why human beings knowingly and willingly make irrational decisions, but there is no doubt that this is what happens; that’s not open to debate.

And so with kufr, as explained before, and I will not repeat them again, there are a host of reasons that could motivate people to choose or remain in their kufr. Changing your religion isn’t merely an intellectual decision. To undergo such a spiritual transformation, one must have virtuous character traits as well, such as humility, sincerity, love of truth, love of God, etc. A spiritual transformation to the truth, as liberating and amazing the experience could be, still comes with severe costs for many people. The pain of losing your friends and family. The pain of losing your status in the community. The pain of admitting that you have been wrong your entire life about the most important thing, namely your purpose in life.

Changing one’s religion isn’t a mere rational decision; it’s much greater than that. And if people don’t have that willpower, determination, and necessary character traits, they will come with as many excuses as their creative minds would permit to justify not taking the necessary leap towards religious truth. They take their chances playing with their everlasting destinies. They say to themselves: “No, I don’t want to make the required sacrifices.” or “Look, I just don’t want to think and talk about this,” or “Look, I’m a pretty good guy, God’s not going to throw me in hell.”, or “I just don’t want to think about it so much so that I can plead ignorance later.” etc. And there you go, they make the wrong fateful decision.

They deliberate and think about what they should do, but eventually, their reason yields to their passions and desires, and that’s why we frequently read in the Qur’an that these people are not soundly using their reason. Not that they don’t have high IQs, but rather because they let their personal desires overcome their reason when it comes to these extremely important spiritual life-transforming decisions.

## **Are Muslims Inconsistent in Their Standards?**

Another objection raised claims that Muslims are inconsistent. The objection would say something like, “Why are you Muslims raising the bar much higher for non-Muslims than for Muslims? Muslims don’t feel obliged to research other religions, so why should others feel obliged? What warrants the Muslim to be legitimately satisfied with his faith while the same isn’t granted to the non-Muslim? Your average Muslim doesn’t know how to argue for his faith, so why should your average non-Muslim be expected to do so? Just as the bulk of Muslim laity feels comfortable brushing off preachers from other religions, so too when it comes to non-Muslims. But why are you Muslims raising the bar and expecting better from



non-Muslims than from yourselves? And oh, by the way, if you Muslims were born into non-Muslim families, the probability that you would have converted to Islam is extremely low. So that only goes to show that you're only Muslims because you were socialized into it."

Well, this can take up an entire lecture on its own, and I'm not going to do that, but this requires laying out the proofs for Islam and demonstrating why it's unique compared to every other belief system out there. I'm not going to do that here. There are plenty of lectures and debates, and written works one could check out for that; however, what I think the Muslim response should be to this argument is that we Muslims do not grant that your average Muslim layperson is relevantly similar to your average non-Muslim layperson. Why? Well,

- 1) There are only a handful of serious intellectual contenders as belief systems to Islam. Not all the religions out there have advocates presenting serious lines of evidence for their veracity. There's only a handful of serious contenders to Islam, like Christianity, religious pluralism, deism, and I hesitate to say atheism and agnosticism because of how totally absurd I find their stances, but let's include them in the list of serious contenders to Islam because they have their so-called "intellectual advocates." So, that's the first thing to bear in mind. Muslims and non-Muslims alike do not need to take any belief system seriously if it's clearly lacking when it comes to the level and quality of evidence presented in its favor.
- 2) The second thing to bear in mind is that even out of these serious contenders, the only one where the stakes are high if the Muslim is wrong is Christianity. That's because Christianity teaches that if you don't accept Jesus in the manner it teaches, then you'd end up going to hell. So, if Christianity is true, then that's a big problem for Muslims. But, if deism is true. Or if religious pluralism is true. Or if atheism is true, then there are no serious consequences for Muslims *even if*, hypothetically speaking, Islam turns out to be wrong. So there's nothing to lose if you don't embrace these belief systems. It's *ultimately* not a big deal. Even with Judaism, Judaism teaches that if you follow the Seven Laws of Noah, which most Muslims do, then even a gentile could make it to heaven. So *even if* Judaism turns out to be true, Muslims have nothing to worry about. (By the way, this is all keeping aside the fact that there are very strong critiques of deism, religious pluralism, atheism, Judaism. I'm not going to go there in this talk.) I'm just pointing out that your average Muslim need not necessarily feel prompted to seriously engage with these belief systems when the ultimate consequences for rejecting them are negligible.

As for Christianity, alhamdulillah, your average lay Muslim knows fully just how logically problematic the fundamental doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation are. They don't need to read all that philosophical literature to know that; it's crystal clear. And so they are warranted for rejecting Christianity when its very fundamental doctrines are too tainted with these logical problems, something that Islam is free from.

The bulk of objections against Islam these days are mainly ethical, and it doesn't take a Muslim genius to see how western moral dominance is playing a role and how God Himself is not subject to these fluctuating man-made Western standards.

So no, I completely reject this assumption that Muslims and non-Muslims are somehow on an equal footing here. No, Islam has very good evidence for itself. It doesn't suffer from any serious logical problems. And it claims that there are severe consequences for rejecting it. And there's no doubting that Islam is a serious religion to contend with given its history, the number of its adherents, and quality of its intellectual scholars, and the number of works authored demonstrating its truth. That it is at least compelling enough to make the true seeker of truth at least consider it seriously.

And for those reasons, it is expected that sincere truth-seeking non-Muslims do engage with Islam by considering it seriously, as their own faiths are unlike Islam in terms of the quality of evidence put forth on behalf of them, in addition to Islam being free of serious logical difficulties in its core doctrines. Muslims, on the other hand, from their perspective, the serious contenders either suffer from glaring problems obvious to laymen themselves or fail to effectively prompt Muslims to even seriously consider them as viable intellectual and religious alternatives to Islam.

And this is keeping aside the fact that many Muslims read the Qur'an, and Allah in the Qur'an speaks with this confident logically-appealing tone that it's the truth and that the alternatives are false. Reading the Qur'an alone would shape the mind of its reader to be critical and confident about its truth. Hardly any religious book out there could even be said to resemble the Qur'an in that manner.

Anyways, as I said, I'm not going to dive into the arguments for Islam here; I just wanted to point out that Muslims need not believe that they are inconsistent and unfair when it comes to the level of truth-seeking standards expected of Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

## Conclusion

I believe we've come to the end. So now, for some concluding remarks.

Allah سبحانه وتعالى says:

وَلَوْ شَاءَ رَبُّكَ لَأَمَنَّ مَن فِي الْأَرْضِ كُلَّهُمْ جَمِيعًا

And if your Lord so willed, everyone on earth would have believed.<sup>37</sup>

He also said:

وَلَوْ شِئْنَا لَآتَيْنَا كُلَّ نَفْسٍ هُدًى وَلَٰكِن حَقَّ الْقَوْلُ مِنِّي لَأَمْلَأَنَّ جَهَنَّمَ مِنَ الْجِنَّةِ وَالنَّاسِ أَجْمَعِينَ

And if we willed, we would have brought to every soul its guidance, however, My saying is true that I will fill up hell with those from amongst the Jinn and mankind.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> 10:99

<sup>38</sup> 32:13

Allah سبحانه وتعالى is basically telling us that hell doesn't *have* to exist. He could have created Iman in our hearts, and that would have been the end of it. Nevertheless, He has sovereignly chosen to create us with a purpose, which entails us having the freedom to reject Him and consequently make fateful decisions concerning our ultimate destinies.

There are many wisdoms underlying Allah's سبحانه وتعالى creation of hell. Hell gives us solace and hope that those who have escaped justice in this life would eventually be judged. It increases our confidence in Allah's justice, and as a result, it also gives us the patience to wait for that justice and not behave like vigilantes and try to take justice into our own hands in this life.

Hell is a testament to just how important our actions, words, and beliefs are. It's quite amazing if you actually think about it. Why would the beliefs and actions of finite creatures like us have such everlasting ramifications? That they matter so much to the point that either everlasting heaven or everlasting hell awaits us as outcomes of what we believe and do. That shows how significant our beliefs and actions are. We *do* matter, and there's a sense of honor in that if you think about it.

But more importantly, hell is a testament to just how holy and supreme Allah سبحانه وتعالى is. It explicates just how horrendous of an evil committing Shirk and kufr is. It is by contemplating the horrors of hell that we come to appreciate and acknowledge the magnitude of the ugliness of Shirk. Hell's existence is a declaration of just how repugnant kufr is.

Many try to sweep hell under the rug to have that peace of mind, but that's clearly a disastrous mistake. And yes, there's no doubt that this is an emotionally taxing subject. And I know what some of you may be thinking, you might be thinking, "Look, Bassam, you may have given all these clever rational responses, but at the end of the day, when I see my friendly non-Muslim colleague at work or my cheerful non-Muslim neighbor, I'm not going to digest the idea that they could possibly wind up in hell."

And look, I can understand and appreciate these sentiments. I really do. But what we need to understand is that Iman does not demand of us that we fully have a conceptual picture of hell and simultaneously desire and relish in the idea that people wind up in it and suffer. On the contrary, Islam has communally obligated Muslims to engage in da'wah not merely as some other kind of Islamic mandate to follow but also as an expression of our care and determination to see others saved from hell.

And we Muslims also need to understand that Allah سبحانه وتعالى could have easily wired our brains and manipulated our emotions so that we would have been entirely comfortable with the idea of hell, both intellectually and emotionally. However, I would also submit that part of our test is to muster the willpower to regulate our emotions through reason. And what I have tried to do in this lecture is demonstrate that there is no successful definitive or probabilistic logical argument against the notion of an everlasting punishment of hell for the crime of Shirk.

And if anybody wishes to insist that such a punishment is incompatible with the attributes of Allah سبحانه وتعالى, then I'd expect that person to have fully considered and researched all the possible and plausible conceptions of God's attributes and ensure that there is, in fact, no possible way to reconcile everlasting

hell with God's divine attributes logically. And I'll say with utmost confidence that people who raise these objections have fallen extremely short in that endeavor, assuming they even tried, as opposed to just lazily settling on what their gut tells them to feel about the subject matter.

Allah سبحانه وتعالى dismisses excuses after the Messengers have been sent, <sup>39</sup>لِنَلَّا يَكُونُ لِلنَّاسِ عَلَى اللَّهِ حُجَّةٌ and we need to stop assuming that we know who the damned are better than Allah سبحانه وتعالى. We need to fear Allah سبحانه وتعالى and let Him speak for Himself and tell us what the standards for attaining salvation and evading hell are.

So, in conclusion, we've looked at some of the most substantial arguments raised against the idea of everlasting hell and have demonstrated that far from being definitive, they are hardly persuasive or even plausible. We didn't literally cover every single argument out there, but still, we did cover, *alhamdulillah*, the most common and important ones and provided sufficient foundational principles that would enable us to address any other argument we haven't touched upon more easily.

And of course, it does not seem fitting that we speak about hell for this long without concluding with a dua asking Allah سبحانه وتعالى to protect us from hell.

رَبَّنَا وَلَكَ الْحَمْدُ حَمْدًا كَثِيرًا طَيِّبًا مُبَارَكًا فِيهِ، اللَّهُمَّ لَكَ الْحَمْدُ كَمَا يَنْبَغِي لِجَلَالِ وَجْهِكَ وَعَظِيمِ سُلْطَانِكَ، اللَّهُمَّ يَا حَيُّ يَا قَيُّوْمُ يَا ذُو الْجَلَالِ وَالْإِكْرَامِ، اهْدِنَا فِي مَنْ هَدَيْتَ، وَعَافِنَا فِي مَنْ عَافَيْتَ، وَاقْضِ عَنَّا بِرَحْمَتِكَ شَرَّ مَا قَضَيْتَ، إِنَّكَ تَقْضِي بِالْحَقِّ وَلَا يَقْضِي عَلَيْكَ،

اغفر لنا ما قَدَّمْنَا وما أَخَّرْنَا، وما أَسْرَرْنَا وما أَعْلَنَّا، وما أَنْتَ بِهِ أَعْلَمُ، أَنْتَ الْمَقْدَمُ وَأَنْتَ الْمُؤَخَّرُ وَأَنْتَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ.

رَبَّنَا أَصْرِفْ عَنَّا عَذَابَ جَهَنَّمَ إِنَّ عَذَابَهَا كَانَ غَرَامًا

اللَّهُمَّ رَبَّنَا آتِنَا فِي الدُّنْيَا حَسَنَةً وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ حَسَنَةً وَقِنَا عَذَابَ النَّارِ

اللَّهُمَّ إِنَّا نَسْأَلُكَ الْجَنَّةَ وَمَا قَرَّبَ إِلَيْهَا مِنْ قَوْلٍ أَوْ عَمَلٍ، وَنَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنَ النَّارِ وَمَا قَرَّبَ إِلَيْهَا مِنْ قَوْلٍ أَوْ عَمَلٍ

اللهم إنا نسألك رضاك والجنة ونعوذ بك من سخطك والنار

وصل الله على سيدنا محمد وعلى آله وصحبه أجمعين

وآخر دعوانا أن الحمد لله رب العالمين

And with that we conclude,

سبحانَكَ اللَّهُمَّ وبحمْدِكَ، أَشْهَدُ أَنْ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنْتَ، أَسْتَغْفِرُكَ وَأَتُوبُ إِلَيْكَ.

Assalamu Alaykum wa-Rahmatullahi wa-Barakatuhu

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